

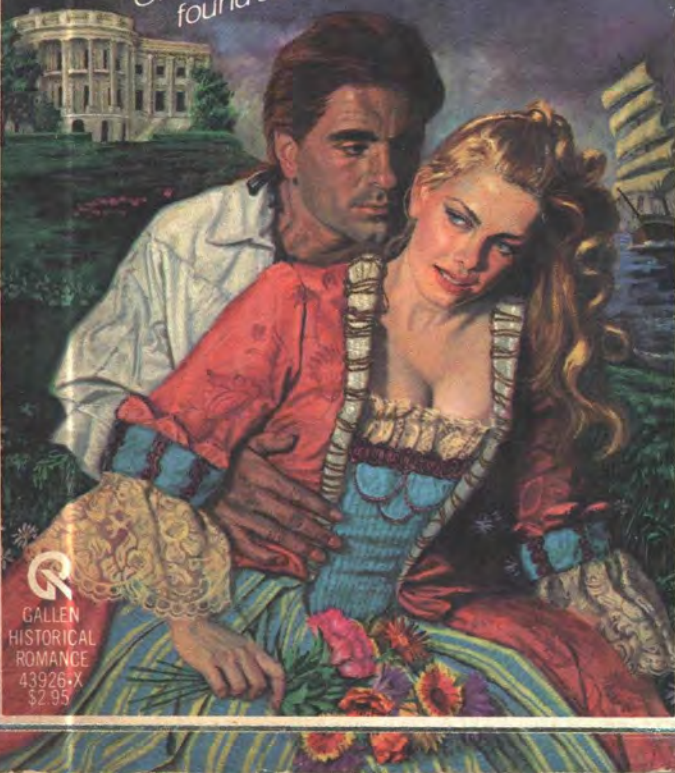
Golden Rebel

VIRGINIA STANDAGE
On the storm-kissed English coast—she
found a love that knew no law!

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GALLEN
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ROMANCE
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***The Heat of Her Passion
Was Fired by the
Heat of Her Rage. . . .***

He laughed, seized her, and brought his mouth down upon hers. His lips were open, and she felt them encompass her own. Then a savage yet tender tongue probed in her mouth as his right hand unlaced her bodice. Dizziness and a hot surge of physical desire made her weak, and when his mouth left hers to take possession of her breast, she made a wild grasp at sanity.

She would allow no man to rape her, least of all this one, a man so ruthless in his dealings with women that he could be hell-bent on seducing one, while loving and planning to marry another.

"Villain!" she cried. Startled, he let go of her and she brought her arm up, striking him hard across the face.

Golden Rebel

VIRGINIA STANDAGE



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Chapter 1



The clock had not yet struck the hour of nine when Samantha was summoned by Aunt Charlotte's bell. Three rings . . . that meant she was surely displeased. Samantha sighed and gave her golden hair one last glance in the mirror before covering it with the drab gray mobcap her aunt insisted she wear in public—and, indeed, she considered even a solitary breakfast of porridge and cold tea to be a public event.

Everything about Aunt Charlotte was gray: her complexion, her hair, her clothes, even her house, both inside and out. "Gray is a most serviceable color," she always proclaimed. "It never soils." The exterior of her house in Wimpole Street was therefore painted gray to disguise the coating of London dust and smoke; and upholsteries and curtains and carpets were chosen in varying tones of the same awful shade. The moment Samantha had arrived at her house, now three years past, Aunt Charlotte had given a small gasp of shock. Upon viewing her niece's costume—the chic green velvet gown and cloak, and the matching hat with its gay plume—she had demanded that it be removed and discarded. It was for ladies of society to appear stylish, she lectured, not impoverished nieces.

"While you are under my roof, Samantha, you will dress as befits your station," she had said primly. "I am sure I have several garments of my own that you, with your small skill with a needle, can refashion for yourself." From that day until the present, Samantha had been forced to make do with her aunt's cast-off clothing. Would there never be any escape from this depressing bondage? she wondered glumly as she entered the dining room and took a seat at the long table that rarely saw more than two places set for any meal.

As she sat in attendance, she heard the clock strike the quarter hour, and as it did so, her aunt entered the room, herself a study in gray from the tight bun atop her head to the sharp points of her house slippers.

"Samantha," Aunt Charlotte uttered in a hushed, meaningful tone, a tone that Samantha recognized all too well as one of admonition. "I think it only right to inform you that I have written to your Uncle Jonothan at Hawksmere. You have been with me now three years, availing yourself of my kindness and charity, but I can no longer tolerate such behavior as you shamelessly demonstrate. Perhaps your uncle will be able to deal with you in an appropriate manner. I have requested, therefore, that he send your brother Richard to fetch you at his earliest convenience."

Samantha's heart gave a leap of joy. Her years of separation from Dick had been nothing but torture, compounded by her aunt's lack of generosity and generally unpleasant nature.

"I see, Aunt," she said slowly, trying not to give away any of her excitement. "And may I enquire as to the reason for your letter? Of what behavior do you speak?"

"Do you *dare* to ask?" thundered Aunt Charlotte in a voice that would shatter glass. "Do you question me in all innocence? Surely you are well aware that I will not tolerate your wanton vanity under my roof!" She warmed to her subject. "Brazen, that is what you are, Niece!"

Samantha's eyes widened as she stared at her aunt through the gloom of the dark dining room. A large Jacobean court cupboard of black oak, densely carved, did nothing to lighten the oppressive scene, which was dimly lit at all hours of the day and evening, in order to save the expense of candles. She switched her weight in the heavy wooden chair with its tall, uncomfortable carved back and hard oak seat. More fragile furniture was considered by Aunt Charlotte to be wanton extravagance, just as current fashions were wanton vanity, drawing attention most indecently to the female form.

"Pray tell me, Aunt," Samantha began, "what has caused this wrong impression of me?"

"Wrong! I have proof and testimony. The Reverend Walters has just reported to me that he saw you standing beside your bedroom window, brushing your hair in full view of the street! Have you no decorum? Or was it done deliberately, as I do suspect, to attract the attention of young Mr. Wentworth opposite? Do not pretend to me, girl, that you are not aware of his sidelong glances."

"On the contrary, Aunt Charlotte, I am very much aware of them, and very gratified by them. At least they prove that I am worth looking at."

"Brazen, as I said! Scandalous, indecent, immodest—"

"Immodest, Aunt Charlotte? But I did not stand by the window in my nightgown. I was decently clad, the hour being eight of the morning. If I strolled to the window absentmindedly, I was unaware of it. The sun was shining, beckoning me outdoors—"

"That is enough! I know your vanities, young woman. You are as vain about your hair as your mother was. That young man was emerging from his home at that precise moment you made a great display of it, drawing back the lace curtains, the Reverend Walters tells me, so the sun shone full upon it, streaming over your shoulders like a wanton."

"The Reverend gentleman appears to have noticed a great deal. But I confess to being glad I have hair like my mother's. If I could resemble her totally, I would be proud. Father kept her image alive for us always, though she died when I was ten and Dick was only eight. 'Clarissa always believed that the poorer we were, the more prosperous we should appear,' he told us frequently. 'Her stage career had something to do with it.' Being an orphan without a relative in the world had taught her how to hold her head up. I thank God I have inherited her talent."

"I wish to hear no more of your scandalous mother." Aunt Charlotte wrung her hands, and a look of pain crossed her sour face.

"She was far from scandalous. 'Pure as the driven snow,' Father always said. He insisted that her innocence had kept her free from contamination in the theatre. 'My dear, my very dear Clarissa,' he would say, then turn away so Dick and I would not see the tears in his eyes. But we knew they were there. So can you blame me, Aunt Charlotte, for wishing to resemble her?"

The words were accompanied by a defiant tilt of a small and resolute chin, a gesture with which Charlotte Kimbolt had become all too familiar during the last three years, and had never been able to check. The girl did possess her mother's looks: She had the same chin; the same retroussé nose; the same softly curving lips, the lower one full and sensual; the eyes large, clear and brilliantly blue, alight with vitality. She had as well, of course, that head of hair the color of sunshine. But she had more than her mother's looks. She had the same blithe spirit that had caught the attention of poor Matthew and led to his downfall. Well did he deserve to be disinherited for marrying a creature from such a background, and a great fool had Jonothan been for supporting him. "They *love* each other! Don't any of you realize that, or understand what it means?" Charlotte could hear Jonothan now, defending Matthew's elopement with the play actress known to all as 'Fair Clarissa.' Charlotte had even suspected that Jonothan was more than a little in love with the young woman himself and would have changed places with Matt, given half a chance.

But Jonothan had always been a fool. All men were fools. And, despising them as she did, Charlotte was not going to allow that young man from the other side of Wimpole Street to cast sheep's eyes in her niece's direction anymore.

It was known throughout the neighborhood that young Mr. Wentworth was affianced to the daughter of an eminent Harley Street surgeon, the banns shortly to be called, so he could only be secretly flirting with Samantha because the girl was brazen enough to encourage him. The sooner she departed, the better. This respectable household had to be protected, and so had Charlotte's good name.

But there was a deeper motive behind Charlotte's desire to dispatch the young woman from her household. Samantha was twenty. Soon a husband must be found for her, a matter that should have been dealt with already in view of her age; but launching her niece onto the marriage market would be expensive. The daunting prospect of providing a dowry for the girl held no appeal. Very decidedly, Charlotte had had enough of the responsibility of a penniless young woman who was not her daughter and who persisted in behaving like a hoyden.

Her dress, for example. Now here was a perfectly serviceable garment that Charlotte herself had worn for years. She had given it to Samantha on her arrival from France, expect-

ing her to take a tuck here and an adjustment there. But that would not be good enough for her, not for the daughter of an actress! She would take a good, plain sensible dress and remodel it into something entirely different—and she did it in the most subtle way, imparting an elegance it had never possessed before and that was most unsuitable for a poor relation. That gray merino she was wearing at this moment hugged her small waist and uplifted her rounded bosom in a way that was vaguely suggestive and highly undesirable. Although it retained the dictates of proper dress—high neck, long sleeves, and absolutely no folderols—it still was a totally different garment from that which had originally covered Charlotte's sedate, whale-boned figure.

Not that Samantha's figure was admirable in any respect—the ideal female form should comprise good hips and plump arms and an ample frame, not this tall will-'o-the-wisp slenderness that could surely commend itself to no man, another reason why Charlotte did not want the task of finding a husband for her. Any man looking for a substantial figure of a woman to be his wife would not look twice at such a creature.

Charlotte knew well enough that despite the girl's unbecoming slenderness she was healthy and strong, but would any man believe it and, even more doubtful, would any man tolerate her spirited tongue? Even when the girl assumed a docile and obedient manner, one had the uneasy suspicion that it was nothing but pretense, a mask behind which she concealed her true feelings—even, sometimes, a secret amusement. It was disconcerting, to say the least, and did nothing to commend her for the marriage market.

It was understandable, surely, with such a background as the girl possessed, that she would grow up a brazen hussy, but Charlotte had stood enough of it. "And so, Niece," she concluded, "I pray that time may be short before you are removed to Hawksmere. Until the arrival of your brother, then, do attempt a certain amount of modesty, however unfelt it may be."

With that, she swept out of the room and away to the kitchen, undoubtedly to scold the cook for letting the roast burn the previous evening. Samantha, overjoyed to be alone to contemplate this great change in her life, started for the stairs to pen a hasty and happy note to her brother. She caught a glimpse of her face reflected in the glass of the longcase clock in the hall and noted that she was smiling

broadly. She felt a surge of optimism and was overcome with a feeling of renewal, as if her life was about to start again. This must have been the way her parents felt when they married. Giddy with love and promise of their years together, but anxious about the family's general disapproval; her wayward, irresponsible parents, who had thought the world well lost for love.

She could, in a sense, comprehend her aunt's fury with her. Just like her parents, she was thoroughly independent and was used to doing as she pleased. The Kimbolts had never taken kindly to those who acted on their own, and that, of course, was why Samantha's father, Matthew, had been cut out of the family fortune when he married Clarissa. Perhaps the most unforgivable sin, in the eyes of every existing branch of the Kimbolt family, had been the audacity of Matthew and Clarissa to be supremely happy together. The taint of being married to a play actress never touched Matthew, and the closed doors of his social world had never worried Clarissa. Every dire prediction of marital misery, incompatibility and ultimate disaster was flouted and proved wrong, and this served as additional fire for resentment among those relatives who had married well but miserably. To their minds, no two people so diametrically opposed in birth, upbringing, education and background had any right to achieve marital bliss when others, ostensibly well matched, failed to even glimpse it.

Samantha went to her writing desk and dipped a quill in the inkstand, but before she could even begin her letter to Dick, she found herself lost in memory of those years when the four of them, refugees from the strict Kimbolt life across the Channel, had been a happy family together—and all the rest of the world be damned!

She remembered her beautiful mother so well, although in fact it was ten years now since she had succumbed to pneumonia. But in those delightful hours when Samantha and Dick would sit by her side and listen as she sang French country songs, and Matthew would look on proudly from his large armchair by the fire, it had seemed as though life would always be this blissful.

And even after Clairssa's death, the three of them had managed bravely. Wherever Matthew went, his children went as well. "And to hell with learning!" he would declare as he beat a hasty retreat from his creditors, dragging Dick and

Samantha with him from place to place, city to city, and even country to country so long as he had something to pawn for the passage money. He did so because upon one thing he was always determined—never to be parted from his son and daughter. The awareness of their father's love provided all the security they needed and was the only legacy he left to them when he died. Nor could they have had a better one.

Of course he had told them of Hawksmere, the estate they would never inherit, thanks to Matthew's irrepressible nature and the marriage he had made. All through Samantha's young life, Hawksmere Abbey had represented the unattainable and therefore the desirable. It was a symbol of the social acceptance that her father had scorned for love, and much as she admired him for that, she had secretly always longed to see the familial estate, and to identify herself with the place. Her forefathers had lived at Hawksmere, and therefore it was her right as a Kimbolt to see it someday.

And now, as soon as Dick arrived and took her from under Aunt Charlotte's eagle eyes, she would in fact view Hawksmere. She was well acquainted with it, if only from her father's tales. One of the first monasteries in England to be closed at the time of the Dissolution, it had been presented by Henry VIII to an early member of the Kimbolt family for favors never recorded. Then it had been converted into a family residence, and for two hundred years or more, the Kimbolts had enjoyed its quiet, cloisterlike environment. Then, some unknown descendant had changed everything. He had turned it into a repository for smuggled goods, and its reputation had spread. Matthew had often entertained his children of a night with tales of rip-roaring smugglers thriving on their ill-gotten gains.

According to many, the trade still flourished despite all attempts to suppress it. The Kentish coastline and the eerie Romney Marsh, Samantha had heard, were dotted with smugglers' dens. Their father had talked about the marsh frequently, particularly after their mother's death, when his thoughts had been prone to wander back into the past. "You either love the marsh or you hate it," he had said, "but even when you hate it, it will forever call you back."

When the children had asked why, Matthew had replied that the marsh was in the blood; it dated back in history to the time of the Romans. Then, of course, nature had taken a hand. Storms threw up some land and drowned other parts,

wiping out great ports, and making long creeks that ran deep inland. And then the marsh also produced the finest wool in the world because it produced the finest sheep.

Again, and then again, Matthew would return in his stories to the other product of the Romney marsh—the smugglers and seamen rougher and tougher than any along the whole of the south coast. The marshmen were said to be a race apart, farmers as well as seamen. They were strong, brave, ruthless and reckless—and very often rich, their pockets lined with gold. Whenever he talked about these men, Matthew Kimbolt's eyes would take on a kind of buccaneer's zest, although he consistently pointed out the dangers of associating with such types. They were dangerous men. Woe betide the innocent passerby who stumbled on one of the smuggler's dens. Informers were dealt with swiftly and violently.

Samantha shuddered and picked up her quill once again, but still she could not begin her letter for the thoughts that galloped through her brain. The violence of the smuggler tales had reminded her of the violence to which she and her young brother had nearly been prey when their father died and they were forced to flee France's reign of terror. Things were even worse now, three years later, than they had been in October of 1789. Samantha had heard all about that memorable day when the women of Paris had marched to Versailles and brought back King Louis and his family. They had cast the royal family into the Palace of the Tuilleries, and now the reports had reached London that they had recently been imprisoned in the Temple. The Terror had been gathering momentum, and it seemed a foregone conclusion that the King would be guillotined, as well as his unpopular wife, Marie-Antoinette, and her unfortunate children.

Samantha glanced down at her drab gray gown and smiled guiltily. Perhaps a modicum of modesty was not always a bad thing, if it saved one's head. The queen who had proclaimed, "Let them eat cake," about the ravenous, angry mobs, would surely regret her fine gowns and her silly shepherdess garb now.

As Samantha thought about it, she marveled that she and Dick had in fact been able to escape when they did; she was astounded that she had had such a clear head about her, in such a time of grief. That night, when her father had sat them down at his feet beside the fire, he had said he was tired. It was the first time either of them had ever heard him say such a thing.

"A brandy," Matt had murmured, "a brandy might help . . ." but by the time Richard had poured it, he could not even hold the glass. Samantha could not keep the tears from her eyes, then. She had not even suspected that he was sick. He had looked at the glass in Dick's hand, and at both his children. Then he had smiled and said it was a pity to waste such excellent liquor, after which he had closed his eyes, sighing very faintly, and never opened them again.

He had planned everything for them, and a good thing too, since neither of them had ever dreamed that the corner of Picardy that had been their home for the past two years could become a threatening and alien place, as it now was. It was Samantha's job to carry out their escape, as her father had explained to her, since she was the eldest. Although she was barely seventeen then, Dick was two years younger, and she was forced to explain all to him the night their father died.

"Have no concern, Dick," she had said, putting up a brave face and drying her tears. "I recollect all that Father told me. We are to go to Pierre Dupont's house, the cottage down by the fishing quai, and he will take us across to Dover in his vessel. All has been arranged and paid for, and Father prepared Dupont in the event that we might arrive in the dead of night sometime. We must go quickly now."

"And when we reach England?" Dick had asked.

"Dupont will hand us over to an offshore vessel that will take us to some hidden spot—there are plenty beneath the white cliffs of Dover. After that, we are on our own, I'm afraid. We must make for Uncle Simeon's house in Rye, over the country border in Sussex. I don't know how long that will take. But Uncle Simeon is a minister of the Church, and though he does not know us, he cannot turn us out."

Samantha had worn her finest, and had insisted that young Dick do the same. She remembered how old Pierre Dupont, the fisherman in Boulogne, had eyed her with a mixture of awe and admiration, for he was only accustomed to seeing refugees dressed in their oldest and shabbiest garments, faces begrimed and hair matted in order to avoid any suspicious glances. Samantha had decided that the only way to handle the upheaval of their lives was to treat the whole thing as a grand adventure. So she had dressed all in green velvet, and held her head high during the long tramp above the cliffs of Wimereaux to Boulogne.

She clutched her carpet bag in one hand, and her young brother's hand in the other, but she never revealed what

thoughts passed through her mind. Only later, when safely ashore in England, had she allowed her guard to relax. She held onto Dick for dear life then, sobbing into his shoulder, but before he could attempt to comfort her, she had rallied, straightened her shoulders and tilted up her chin, ready for the next portion of the adventure.

How naïve and trusting they had been! Even their father, non-churchgoer though he was, had believed that a representative of God would do his duty by a brother's children. But in fact, he had been wrong. Simeon scarcely gave them the time to recover from their journey before packing them into a fast post chaise straight for Abel Hardwick, the family solicitor, in London. Although telling Samantha that only Hardwick could legally decide what should be done with them, Samantha guessed that their uncle was shocked to see the precocious offspring of Matthew Kimbolt and his unacceptable wife.

Abel Hardwick was a small, intense man, who immediately began to contact members of the Kimbolt family, in order to ascertain their disposition toward these lost children.

Aunt Augusta, it appeared, had thrown up her hands in horror at the suggestion that Samantha should live under the same roof as her daughters. Genteel Emmeline and Penelope had to be protected from the contamination of a young man and woman more familiar with the street cafes of Paris than respectable English drawing rooms. These children were unfit for civilized society. There was a stamp about them that no respectable household could accept—the stamp of a nomad existence on the Continent, the latter years spent solely with their reprehensible father.

So Augusta Kimbolt was spared the responsibility of having them, and so was her brother Simeon, when it came down to Hardwick actually asking him. An eminent preacher, Simeon insisted, could scarcely be expected to suffer the embarrassment of introducing such worldlings into his congregation. And what might be their influence on his daughter, Patience, a pious girl and a humble one? Samantha understood completely, when Hardwick told her that Simeon's household was out of the question. She could remember how he had looked at her when they arrived from Dover—swiftly, in a startled way, then averting his eyes very quickly, apparently disliking what he saw.

That left only Charlotte and Jonothan, one a spinster and the other a widower; both had comfortable means, ample

accommodations, and no offspring. Jonothan had a stepson, Mark Chaters, the son of his late wife, Ruth, but Mark no longer lived with Jonothan at Hawksmere—no one knew why, exactly.

Hardwick then took matters into his own hands and was firm in his unctuous way, pointing out to Charlotte Kimbolt what an asset an unpaid companion would be, and to Jonothan his responsibilities to the boy—but, as far as Jonothan was concerned, no real persuasion had been necessary. He hardly heeded what anyone said these days.

Then the solicitor was forced to inform the children. The lawyer's dark chambers in Lincoln Inn Fields had exploded beneath the protests of sister and brother. In a world suddenly bereft of their father, the one person who had kept it alive and merry and illogically secure, they had nothing left but each other and the bond of affection forged by Matthew Kimbolt. Their reprobate father had passed onto them his unshakable belief that something would always turn up, and therefore they were unprepared for this impending separation.

"I won't go!" Samantha had declared. "I refuse to be parted from Dick!"

"And I won't be parted from Sam," the boy had vowed, not even bothering to add the deferential "Sir" that the lawyer had obviously expected.

The solicitor regarded him coldly over his steel-rimmed spectacles, and said in a voice that matched them, "I presume that ugly abbreviation is intended to refer to your sister, Samantha?"

"Who else?" the fifteen-year-old Dick had scoffed. "I have always called her Sam, and always shall," to which she had added, touching his shoulder reassuringly, "They cannot do it, Dick. No one can separate us, so have no concern."

But in a world of adults, the young and impoverished have no say. They were penniless orphans, and, as the lawyer so coldly pointed out to them, they had no other choice but the workhouse.

Samantha, then, in her typical way, vowed she would make the best of a bad job. "You'll be fine with Uncle Jonothan, Dick," she promised her brother. "You remember that Father always loved him best."

"But Uncle Simeon ridicules him, is that not so?" Dick had asked. "He thinks him a sentimental fool and his poetry sheer drivel."

"I don't know. I think Father felt Jonothan has a good heart, though he gives in to people too easily and lacks initiative. But that's all in your favor, Dick," Samantha had smiled.

"But what of you, with Aunt Charlotte?"

"I shall cook and clean and sew, and win my way into her heart!" she had declared.

But of course that had not occurred, Samantha thought, as she picked up her quill. Hastily she scribbled, "Dear Dick, come soon and rescue a damsel in distress! Love, Sam." Her three years with Aunt Charlotte had somehow emphasized her lack of a home and a family, but now at last she was going to be where she belonged; at Hawksmere, and with her brother. Dick had flourished there, he had put down roots, thanks to the kindness of Uncle Jonothan, who had given the young boy the run of his house and made him feel welcome. Now she would have the same chance.

At last, Samantha was going home.

Chapter 2



The bed was warm where her body had lain, the pillow still rumped. Richard groped for her through mists of sleep and erotic memories, his blood resurging. But Alice, with her soft flesh and smooth skin and her wild abandon, had slipped away without disturbing him, back to the kitchens where she belonged.

He rolled into the hollow she had left, sinking deeper into the feather mattress and absorbing the lingering warmth of her, and at once the delirium of the night became more vivid than any erotic memory. He was wide awake and hungry for her, feeling again her encircling thighs and the soft domes of her breasts beneath his searching mouth. But alas, night was over and day, with its imperative demands, was upon him. He had to leave this bed, which had now become Alice's as much as his own, and yield to duty.

Not that bringing Samantha to Hawksmere could be regarded as a duty—he looked forward to a reunion with the sister he had not seen since their escape from France. He had been fifteen then and she seventeen. Hell's teeth, she must be all of twenty now, and an old maid! In Aunt Charlotte's house there were never any male visitors, Samantha had told him in one of her letters. Dear old Sam. She had been closer than a

sister, a lively companion, sharing an unconventional upbringing at the hands of unconventional parents, and he had missed her dearly these three long years.

Richard thrust his strong legs out of bed. Now eighteen, he was well built, with hardened muscles and a tanned skin. The tan was due to life by the sea and the strength to activities on the Romney Marsh, which spread out like an endless carpet below the Kimbolts' ancient family home. Hawksmere stood high above the miles of dike-ridden land that once lay beneath the sea, poised upon what had then been the cliffs of England. Dick's ancestors had created dikes, or long ditches to drain the land, and had stocked the surrounding acres with sheep, the finest sheep producing the finest wool in the world. Then the Romney men marked their boundaries and established leases of marsh areas, known locally as "innings," which might later be sold or assigned. Even Thomas à Becket had delegated some of his monks to take part in the work of digging the dikes before he was murdered in Canterbury cathedral. His murder, though, was unlike the usual marsh murders because it was prompted by reasons other than piracy and plunder.

Richard jerked his mind away from that thought. It was unwise to think of certain things in this part of the world; better to live in the moment. And this precise moment presented him with the very important problem of deciding what to wear for his journey to London.

Still naked, he padded across the dusty oak floor to a tall cupboard of cypress wood, where dust lingered thick on the panels. He had grown so accustomed to domestic neglect that he scarcely heeded it, but never would he tolerate neglect of his clothes, which Alice, bless her, cared for on top of her other duties—and all for love of him. "To hell with Martha Piper," she had blandly declared when he asked if Uncle Jonothan's housekeeper disapproved of her undertaking extra duties for the master's nephew.

He cared a lot for Alice—enough to be concerned for her in those faraway domestic quarters, beneath the lash of the slatternly housekeeper's tongue. He had felt sorry for her from the moment he first arrived at Hawksmere and saw her scrubbing the steps fronting the great double doors. The place had not been so neglected then; only later had it begun to deteriorate, when Uncle Jonothan had become oblivious to anything other than his poetry. But this was no time to dwell on the problems of his affair with Alice. He had to get to

London to fetch his sister; time enough to recall the delights of Alice's flesh when he returned. He was determined that his sister's presence in the household would not be allowed to restrict such pleasures. With luck, she would sleep sufficiently far from his own room to have no suspicion of other things that went on—including his regular bedding of the housemaid.

Alice tapped respectfully on the door and did not enter until Richard bade her to, whereupon she walked in bearing his breakfast tray, eyes demurely downcast. He wanted to laugh aloud, remembering all that had happened between them during the night, but he guessed that old Piper must be somewhere around. He contented himself with nuzzling Alice's soft neck and whispering in her ear, "Come back to bed. Let me have your lovely body again . . ." and the color rose hotly to her cheeks, as he had known it would.

Setting down the tray, she turned and slid her hands over his bare hips, caressing him so that he rose with his usual swift desire, holding her between his legs and pressing against her so that she felt his thrusting urgency. Another moment, and he would have been stripping her, but for Martha Piper's screeching voice.

"Alice . . . Alice! Drat the wench, where's she got to? There's them stairs as want brushing th'smorn and she should be at it right now!"

"Coming, Mrs. Piper," Alice called obediently, then stuck out her tongue in the direction of the voice and winked at Richard before walking docilely out into the corridor. Not that such docility would deceive the housekeeper. She had summed up Alice Turner as a brazen young hussy long ago, eyeing her thick dark tresses and seductive body with suspicion and just cause. Alice had enticed Richard with ease, slipping into his bed one night without invitation and whispering tremulously, "You're not going to send me away, are you, Master Richard? I know you've been wanting me for a long time, the same way as I've been wanting you. . . ."

Martha Piper would have been as surprised as he had been to learn that despite her confident air (the housekeeper called it "bold") Alice had been a virgin then. The discovery had touched Richard profoundly, for there was scarcely a village wench who had not offered herself to him, either secretly or openly, though it had been some time before he availed himself of such opportunities.

By now, experience had made Alice and Richard attuned

to one another, their unions more and more frequent and more and more passionate, riding together to peaks of physical delight that they achieved repeatedly. Last night they had slept after the first wild frenzy, then wakened and come together again and again, each time more satisfyingly, their flesh and their senses merging until they were no longer two separate beings, but one body soaring to pinnacles of pleasure.

Enough. No time to think of that now. No time to recall the yielding softness of her flesh and the heat deep inside her. The cold light of day streamed through the windows. He could hear the distant roar of the sea echoing across the marsh and knew the wind must be high to carry the sound so far. He could almost hear the thrashing of willows down by the water, the harsh rasp of bulrushes and reeds, the cry of seagull and heron, the beating of wild swans' wings flying in formation across the land, long necks outthrust and beaks wide to release their harsh voices. It would be a rough drive to Londontown, so the sooner he started, the better.

But first there was the important matter of clothes. The right costume was essential. He knew instinctively that he must create a good impression on the staid woman who had written to Uncle Jonothan some weeks ago, asking to be released from the responsibility of "that willful daughter of Matt's. She is too high spirited by far, brother. Alas, the blood of *that woman* runs in her veins." And then, as if afraid that this picture of their wayward niece would discourage Jonothan from accepting her, she had continued, "However, I have instilled into her a good knowledge of housewifery, and since Piper must now be advancing in years, a young woman like Samantha could be very useful in supervising your household."

The letter finished with a request to be notified of a suitable date on which to receive the young lady: "For my part, I am willing to dispatch her without delay."

And now Richard was happily off to relieve the old lady of her undesirable charge. He selected his clothing with care. He was not a fop, but he liked to cut a dash and had enough money in his pockets to indulge his tastes. Fortunately, dear old Uncle Jonothan had never asked where he got it from. He decided on a Werner costume with a cutaway tailcoat of pale green wool, the front cut square and set slightly above the waistline, the tails at the back to knee level. He liked the

double-breasted style, with six buttons in front, and particularly the turndown, velvet collar.

Thank Gemini, he thought, looking at his image in the glass, that wigs were going out of fashion. Accustomed as he had become to an unrestricted, open-air life, he wore his natural hair dressed in Cadogan style instead, with short curls at the side and the remainder swept back straight from the brow, tied with a bow at the nape of the neck.

Alice had packed an overnight bag for him and sent it down to the coach house. He had only to pick up a dark green redingote, sling it casually over his shoulders where it hung like a cloak beneath its three wide shoulder capes, and he was on his way. He would use the best carriage and pair, of course, and the speedy high-stepping grays. One thing to be said for Uncle Jonothan: he knew a good piece of horseflesh when he saw it, and the grays would be unsurpassed even in Hyde Park.

Not, alas, that there would be time in which to demonstrate what a good whip he was on the carriage drive alongside Rotten Row, but there was consolation in the thought that his turnout was handsome enough to be noticed even on the streets of London. One good thing about this trip was that it offered the opportunity of a shopping expedition. Even in faraway Rye it was known that pantaloons were coming into fashion, and he was intent on a pair of colored ones of stockinet, cloth, or perhaps bucksin or velvet. It would set Rye alight next time he drove there, and bring disapproving frowns from sanctimonious Uncle Simeon, whose virtue was an eternal reproach to his dissolute young nephew.

Such contemplation totally absorbed Richard as he turned the high-stepping grays out of the stable yard and headed for the London road, unaware of Alice watching from a scullery window. She saw the set of his broad shoulders beneath the immaculately fitting coat, and his strong thighs beneath tight buckskins, and promptly recalled them kneeling above her.

He had taught her so much of love's ecstasies that those hours in bed with him had now become the peak of her existence. They were the hours she waited for as she went about her duties, nursing her precious secret, longing to boast to Sarah, the scullery maid, and to that detestable Martha Piper, that Master Richard was her lover. How they would gasp at her—disbelieving, of course. God, how she loved him! She could afford to feel charitable to the other two

servants since she knew Richard Kimbolt was hers forever. Hadn't he told her so, over and over again?

Whenever they could, they snatched secret meetings, lying in the sweet smelling hayloft, or on bales of warm fleeces in the shearing sheds after Dempster, the shepherd, had gone home to his hut on the marsh. Anywhere, so long as they could delight in each other's bodies. She didn't give a damn whether Dempster spied on them, as she suspected he often did. Nor did she care about her mother's opinion; she had good reason to hate her mother. Apart from that, the woman asked too many questions and handed out too much advice, to neither of which Alice paid any heed.

She visited her mother less and less these days, reserving all her spare time for Master Richard. Let the woman say what she liked about men using the female sex for their pleasure, then casting them aside. Richard Kimbolt would never do that. At the thought of his unquenchable eagerness she felt the now familiar quickening in the most intimate part of her body, and wondered how she would endure the ache of it until he returned and took her into his bed again.

"How many weeks now since I posted that letter to your uncle?" Aunt Charlotte fretted after the final course had been set before them—heavy suet pudding with a plain vanilla sauce, which she always pronounced filling fare and economical. It was a dish that stuck in Samantha's throat, and she could scarcely force down two spoonfulls of it. "It must be all of six."

"Six and a half, to be exact," replied her niece, thereby revealing the fact that she too had been counting the days. If there was ever testimony to ingratitude, Aunt Charlotte fumed, glaring at Samantha across the table, this was surely it. The girl was evidently anxious to be on her way. What appalling insolence, after being fed and housed and given a variety of suitable cast-off clothes.

"My brother has never been a letter writer," said Charlotte with a sniff as she brought her spoon to her mouth, "but he could at least have had the courtesy to answer, and to express some gratitude for the acquisition of a useful addition to his domestic staff."

Samantha sighed. "Perhaps my uncle has been unwell," she suggested.

"In that case, he could have dictated an answer, and your brother could have penned it," the old lady snapped.

Samantha was, in fact, feeling more than curious about the lack of response from Uncle Jonothan. Perhaps he did not want her either, and then what would she do? It was inconceivable that he was as mean as his sister, unwilling to feed an extra mouth. No. That could not be true. Dick had written that Jonothan scarcely paid any attention to the disposition of his money. But if he refused to house her, for whatever reason, she would have to seek work of some kind, exchanging servitude to her aunt for servitude to strangers, for she was qualified for nothing better—except governessing, perhaps. She liked children and their lively company. She had had no formal education, but having lived so much in France, she could at least teach that country's language. The idea revived her spirits, which even the long years in this gaunt gray house had not been able to obliterate.

It was at that precise moment that the housekeeper tapped on the door and entered almost before her mistress could command that she do so. The woman's usually placid face betrayed her excitement.

"There's a gentleman in the hall, ma'am—a Mr. Richard Kimbolt, asking to see you immediately. I told him you were dining, but—"

"Dick!"

Three years of repression flew out of the window as Samantha raced from the room. If her aunt protested, she was unaware of it. She was through the door in a flash, wings on her feet, joy racing with her. Then she halted in astonishment, for the tallest and most elegant young man she had seen for a long time stood there; a veritable nonpareil. Self-assured, handsome and, most heart-stopping of all, a replica of her father.

This was not the boy she remembered—how absurd of her to imagine he would be! She was looking at a tall young man with the same Kimbolt stance, the same line of chin, the same profile with that unmistakable aquiline nose. There was absolutely nothing boyish about him.

The profile turned, and there he was, full face, looking at her with the well-remembered grin. Then the fleeting impression of looking at a stranger bearing her father's features vanished at once.

"Sam!"

Nothing could have been more reassuring than that. It was long since she had been called by that name, and only Dick had ever used it. She gave a shout of joy and raced to him, to

be swept up in a brotherly hug and whirled around like a spinning top. Laughter echoed in the gloomy hall, the first real laughter ever to be heard in this house. Then he set her on her feet, saying, "Let me look at you, Sam. My word, but you've aged!"

"Aged! Indeed! And what of yourself?"

"No offense, Sam. The years become you, but the color of that gown does not. Hell's teeth, what made you choose such a shade?"

He broke off, looking over her head and, without glancing back, Samantha knew their aunt was standing in the dining room doorway, rigid with disapproval. Dick's laughing eyes sobered a little, but he was not in the least put out.

"Aunt Charlotte, I presume?" He bowed with natural charm. "It is a pleasure to meet you, ma'am. My sister's letters have always been full of your praises. I am indebted for your kindness to her."

Liar, thought Samantha, smothering her laughter. She had scarcely ever referred to their kinswoman, except to say that "she was always ailing, so let's talk about more pleasant things."

The tight lines of Charlotte's mouth relaxed a little, but for her nephew, not for her niece. Obviously he had been sent with a reply from Jonothan. Even so, she remained tight-lipped as she said, "I regret your sister's hoydenish behavior, young man. I have tried in vain to cure her."

"Gemini, you'd never tame Sam! Did you really expect to?" Richard laughed disarmingly, but then realized he had said the wrong thing. His glance slid apologetically to his sister and away again, and out of the corner of his mouth he whispered, "Sorry about that, Sam."

Beneath her breath she hissed, "*Samantha!*"

"I do not recall giving you permission to leave the table, Niece, let alone race from the room in that deplorably unladylike fashion."

"I apologize, Aunt," came the meek response.

Richard was astonished. These years in this house had taken their toll on his sister. Never would so subdued an answer have passed her lips in the old days.

"In that case, you may accompany your brother into the drawing room," Aunt Charlotte graciously decreed.

Side by side, brother and sister followed the ramrod back until it reached the drawing room door, when Richard, with one swift movement, reached forward and opened it, then

stood aside for the old lady to enter. Samantha could see that the polished manner in which he did so pleased their aunt, though for her own part she found it surprising. Never had she expected her young brother to acquire such poise at Hawksmere, which he had once described as being gaunt and isolated.

"Come over here, Nephew, that I may look at you."

Aunt Charlotte picked up a silver candelabrum and held it high, its light illuminating Richard as he obeyed. His movements were unhurried, with smooth grace. In the heavy mirror above the marble fireplace Samantha caught sight of their two heads, his so dark and hers so fair. And Aunt Charlotte's words, after she had thoroughly inspected him, confirmed her thoughts.

"Ah," said the old woman with satisfaction, "you, at least, are a Kimbolt."

"Meaning that I have the family looks and my sister lacks them? But that doesn't put her beyond the pale, surely?"

Samantha waited for the wrath of God to descend, but Aunt Charlotte simply nodded, repeating, "A Kimbolt indeed." She held out the candelabrum for Samantha to replace on its stand and signaled Richard to take a seat opposite her. "I assume you have brought a reply from my brother at long last?"

"Not exactly, ma'am." He stole a glance at Samantha. "I have come to take my sister back with me to Hawksmere."

"Is *that* the only acknowledgment Jonothan can make? Is he too lazy to even pen a line to his sister?"

"Indeed not, ma'am. I regret that I have chilling news." He took a breath and continued. "Jonothan died recently and I am afraid your letter was not opened until after the funeral, when Abel Hardwick and I went through his papers together."

Charlotte gasped, and her hand flew to her throat.

"As soon as I read your letter," Dick continued, as Samantha snatched up the smelling salts from a side table and ran to her aunt's assistance, "I traveled post haste—"

Aunt Charlotte cut right across his words, crying out and clutching at her bosom. "Jonothan, dead! My poor brother, dead! I cannot believe it!"

"Please, Aunt," Samantha waved the bottle of salts before her nose. "Here, lean on me." Samantha braced herself and supported her aunt's considerable weight on her arm. Of course, she had never known Jonothan, but she had long

hoped to meet this kindly old man. Now that would never be possible. Her thoughts raced. What now? What would happen to her now?

Her speculation was interrupted by her aunt, who was again herself and was gasping, "My poor brother! My poor dear Jonothan! Why could I not have been with him?"

"I assure you," said Dick, leaning toward her, "he suffered not at all. He went as I think he wished to go—in his cups." At her gasp of horror, Richard reached over and patted her hand consolingly. "This is the truth, ma'am. I can think of no way in which dear old Uncle Jon would have preferred to die."

He cast a glance at his sister, and the understanding look in his eyes told her that everything would be all right—that *he* would make it right, no matter how. Oh, but it was good to see him again, Samantha thought. Her optimism revived, for hadn't Richard announced that he had come to take her home? Her spirits soared, and she allowed her mind to wander to the future. Now that Jonothan was dead, what would happen to Hawksmere? The thought seemed to communicate directly from her aunt's mind, for at that very moment, Charlotte asked the question that Samantha had longed to ask.

"I presume he named you his heir, Nephew? Those daughters of Augusta are both wed at last, but neither has yet produced a son, and even so you have prior claim, despite the fact that your father was disinherited. I am sure Abel Hardwick could find some loophole to establish you in his place. As for Simeon's daughter, Patience is too plain a creature to ever have the chance to marry . . . and Jonothan had no children of his own . . . and Simeon is firmly ensconced in his rectory. . . ." Her shrewd brain was working fast. "Yes, surely you must have inherited Hawksmere. You must marry, of course, and produce sons of your own." She finished with a touch of asperity. "You are smiling, young man. May I ask why?"

"My apologies, ma'am. I was merely amused at the idea of Uncle Jon naming me his heir. He attended to that matter years ago, in a will drawn up by a firm of Rye solicitors. His heir is his stepson, Mark Chaters. You look surprised."

"Naturally I am surprised." Her voice betrayed its indignation. "My brother *cannot* bequeath Hawksmere to any but a blood relation!"

"He has done so, nevertheless, and since he inherited

exclusively when my father was disinherited, it cannot be debated. Uncle Jon owned Hawksmere. He once confided that the place was a millstone round his neck, so his stepson is welcome to it. But I am glad Chaters is letting me remain. . . . And now, ma'am, if you will excuse me? I have obtained lodgings at an inn in Kensington Village. I will call for my sister after noon tomorrow—I have business to attend to prior to that. Important business," he added. He wondered how early that excellent tailor in Savile Row opened his doors. Then he would visit the hatter in St. James's, and the excellent shoemaker next door. Now, of course, he was anxious to partake of a good meal at The White Horse in Piccadilly, and prayed this gray woman before him would not invite him to supper, for he guessed that the fare in her house would be a stodgy one indeed—and possibly teetotal. Poor Samantha, what a life she must have endured here! Her golden head was the only bright thing within these walls, and even that was covered with an unbecoming mobcap.

"What is he like, this Mark Chaters?" his aunt was demanding.

"I have no idea, ma'am. We have met only infrequently in public places and have never been properly introduced. I'd say he's quite old—getting on for thirty, I imagine, for he was about sixteen when his mother remarried. I recall Uncle Jonathan telling me so. We used to have long talks beside the fire of an evening before he was taken with the drink—though that, I suspect, began shortly after his wife's death. Poor Uncle Jon. He was a lonely old man."

But it was plain that Aunt Charlotte had already expended all the sympathy she had in her for a brother who had so fallen from grace.

"In view of what you told me about his—condition—I feel sure the will could be contested on the grounds that he was in no fit state when it was drawn up." She clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

"My uncle was in full possession of his faculties, and the Rye solicitor confirms that he was stone cold sober at the time. As for a Kimbolt inheriting, well let Uncle Simeon contest the will, if he wishes. From what I hear of Mark Chaters, it will be a tough fight. He is said to be a shrewd businessman. A boatbuilder and shipper in Folkestone who drives a hard bargain—hence his success. He is well-heeled, I believe."

"If by that vulgar expression you mean wealthy," Aunt

Charlotte sniffled, "it is very likely true. I recall that his mother was the widow of a well established Kentish boat-builder. Presumably the son inherited, and now Hawksmere, also! Why did he not remain on there after his mother's death?"

"I really have no idea—Uncle Jonothan rarely spoke of him. I only know he set himself up in rooms above the boatyard, where he was already working in the family business."

"Is he aware that I am coming?" Samantha put in.

"Not yet, but have no concern." Dick smiled down at her and squeezed her shoulder. "He has agreed to my remaining, and the Rye solicitor has confirmed this, so Chaters can hardly refuse a roof to my sister. Besides, Hawksmere needs a competent housekeeper and you could not have a higher testimonial than Aunt Charlotte's letter. Your praise of my sister's accomplishments ensures her acceptance, ma'am," he said, turning to her, "and earns my gratitude. It will earn Mark Chaters', also, when he sees the place. There could be no chatelaine more slovenly than Martha Piper." He finished cheerfully, "You have a difficult time ahead of you, Sam, putting that house in order. I hope it will not daunt you."

She cast him a scornful glance. "On the contrary, dear brother. I will relish the challenge." Never again would she have to endure her aunt's company, since Charlotte considered the marsh to be bad for her health.

Freedom from her aunt's supervision suggested freedom in other ways, too. Freedom to be herself, to pursue life to the full, to make up in experience all these past three years had denied her; freedom of having her own opinions and freedom of movement, even to fall in love were fate so generous. She closed her eyes dreamily and smiled. She dreamed of giving her heart and body to a man, as unreservedly as Fair Clarissa had given hers to Matthew Kimbolt. The thought made Samantha's pulses race. She was a full-blooded young woman, and knew it. She was ready for bodily love, and she yearned for it—with the right man.

No doubt Richard had his escapades, he was surely old enough to have bedded a variety of village wenches, but promiscuity was for men, not for women, and certainly not for her. She wanted all or nothing. Somewhere out there, in the world from which she had been cut off, there must exist a man who could readily enslave her heart and body! She was not given to daydreaming about her ideal lover; when he

came into her life, she was confident she would recognize him at once—there would be instant rapport, a communion of the spirit, a leaping of the blood, a stirring in the loins. Even to contemplate such a moment made her breasts swell and harden, the nipples rise, and the secret places of her body stir. If dreaming about it could have such an effect, how much more wonderful must the reality be! And tomorrow she would begin her journey out into the world where the right man must surely exist. She fell asleep that night on a cloud of expectancy, and dreamed of a new life, one replete with love and passion and excitement.

Chapter 3



They were on the road shortly after noon next day, and within two days they had reached Goudhurst. Here they were to lodge at the Star & Eagle, so that they would reach Hawksmere in comfortable time on the morrow. Richard had driven at a spanking pace from London, handling the reins like an expert, and even Samantha, who had little knowledge of horseflesh, recognized the pair of grays as thoroughbreds.

"Uncle Jon kept a good cellar and a good stable," her brother told her. "He gave me free use of the latter. The former was his own private solace, which was very convenient at times."

"Indeed. And why was that?" Samantha asked.

Richard grinned at her. "Do not be so inquisitive, my dear."

She smiled. Her brother was at the wild oats stage and therefore she had to be tolerant. There was devilment in his eyes, which added to his looks, and undoubtedly attracted many a young woman.

"I am so glad to be free, and to be with you again my dearest brother," she cried, unable to contain herself any longer. She reached up to the lace insertion in her bodice and ripped it from the top of her dress, tossing it away on the

breeze and sharing a hearty laugh with her brother as she did so. "Farewell to respectability!" she chortled. "From now on I refuse to hide every inch of my body as if it were something shameful! Oh, I am so happy to be rid of Aunt Charlotte, Dick!"

"That I can see for myself," he said, enjoying the spectacle of his sister being truly merry, as in the old days. "Sam, you're quite a picture, you know that," he added, appraising her with a glance.

"Still you insist on that vile pet name! Can't you see that I'm a grown woman now?"

"Indeed you are," he threw back his head and laughed. "But the name will still become you when you go to your grave. I am sure it will even suit you when your wardrobe is taken in hand." He could not get over how lovely his sister was. With that shining mane of wheat-colored hair, she closely resembled the portrait of their mother, the one that used to hang over the living-room breakfront. One day, when Matthew had been absent from their lodgings, Clarissa had taken it down and sold it to meet urgent bills. She had stubbornly refused to reveal the buyer's name, knowing that her husband would go storming after it, for it had been his most treasured possession. Richard had often sworn to go searching for it, but now, as he glanced at his sister, he realized he had far better than the oil on canvas.

"My wardrobe, eh?" his sister scoffed, regarding her gray gown. "If I am to be as well dressed as you, I shall have to earn the means—goodly means, judging by your appearance. That is, if Mark Chaters sees fit to engage me."

"Have no worry, he will. And if the man proves to be tight in the fist, I will look after you myself."

"How will you do that, Dick? The generous allowance Uncle Jonothan made you must surely have ceased with his death?"

To that, her brother made no answer, except to glance at her sideways with a roguish smile.

They climbed the hill leading up from the pond in the center of Goudhurst, with the inn of Elizabethan timbering standing beside the ancient church at the crest. As her brother handed her down at the inn steps, Samantha looked around, entranced.

"I have never seen a place so picturesque and peaceful," she remarked wonderingly.

"Picturesque, yes. Peaceful, no. In 1747 the bloodiest

battle took place here between the men of the village and the Hawkhurst Gang, the worst group of cutthroats ever known. Smugglers, all of them. But the men of Goudhurst fought them, mainly from the church tower." He pointed up, indicating the site of the battle. "They even killed two of the brigands."

"And what happened to the rest of the gang?" asked Samantha eagerly, thrilled by the fact that she stood exactly at the spot where all this had occurred.

"They were all rounded up, every man jack of 'em. Of course, some of them got off and escaped, and because their numbers were large, they soon gathered steam and showed their evil heads elsewhere. For sometime afterward, their diabolical exploits increased throughout the whole of Kent and Sussex." He glanced at his sister and, catching the expression on her face, he drew an arm around her waist.

"You are shivering, Sam. Come inside and get warm."

But her shivering was not due to cold. The lovely village seemed to have darkened with the talk of murder and violence.

Dick shook her by the shoulders and then drew a brotherly arm through hers. "I pray you, pay no heed. The Hawkhurst Gang came to an end for all time when they were finally caught and hanged at Chichester, but you are entering a tough part of England. History has made it so. Come, Sister, you were never craven in the old days!"

"Craven! My dear Dick, after these past years of tedium, how could I fail to welcome the rattle of knives and cutlasses? And I do hope Hawksmere has a headless ghost or sinister legend to imperil my life!"

"Alack, no," he shrugged sadly. "Nothing so exciting."

"I am heartbroken," she mocked as he led her into the inn. "Perhaps the new owner of Hawksmere will prove to be some blackbrowed villain to endanger me! In that case, life will certainly not be dull!"

Dick laughed and so did she. Together they went into the inn and sat down to enjoy an excellent meal and a good night's rest.

Samantha awakened the next morning refreshed and eager to embark on the last lap of a journey she had never expected to take place. Perhaps she would be disappointed, and her brother's description of a gaunt and rambling place prove to be accurate, but in her imagination, she still pictured Hawksmere as something more than a stately mansion. It was the

home of her forefathers. If anyone were an intruder, it would be the man who was now considered the legal owner, ironic as that might seem.

She scarcely gave a thought to Mark Chaters. He was some vague, nebulous figure to whom she could give neither form nor face. Perhaps the Kimbolts would succeed in ousting him, or buy Hawksmere back into the family. All that counted now was that she was not only to see their ancestors' home, but live in it. If the graciousness and elegance of Hawksmere had suffered beneath Martha Piper's neglect, she would restore both and take a pride in doing so.

Hawksmere exceeded Samantha's expectations. Standing high on a headland, it was silhouetted against the afternoon sky, and it dominated the landscape for miles around; the coastline too. Far out at sea that rugged pile would be seen, like a giant that had stood for centuries, defying force and tempest, invader and enemy.

"It is *awesome!*" she breathed as Richard halted the grays and pointed with his whip.

He shrugged. "I suppose so. I warned you that it was a great barn of a place, didn't I? You see that main tower? That forms the central living quarters, with wings going off east and west. They house nothing but unused cells from the old monastery and are entirely shut up, except for the kitchen quarters in the west wing. Domestic staff sleep there, apart from Thomas, the coachman, and his wife, who acts as cook. They live above the coach house."

Dick gave the reins a flick, and the horses moved on as Samantha settled back in her seat contentedly. In the hedgerows, young green buds sprouted and migrant birds, newly returned to home shores, busily nested. And she saw sheep—hundreds of sheep, like distant flecks upon the earth, and, beyond them, the sea.

"You will see plenty of wildlife here, Samantha—especially down there on the Romney Marsh. There is every variety of waterfowl."

The marsh appeared below them, spread out far below—an immensity of flat green land dappled with glistening ribbons of light that endlessly intertwined in serpentine patterns; she saw the dykes, those snaking channels of water dug by man to irrigate and drain and mark property boundaries. It was as if she were looking down upon another world, remote and unreal beneath an overhanging haze that merged sea and sky

and land together, so that the marsh seemed to have no end, but to spread into eternity.

"Father used to say that one either loves the marsh, or hates it. Which do you, Dick?"

"Hell's teeth. I don't know! I never think about it, except to curse when the mist is bad—though that, of course, is a help to most people in these parts. It provides an even more effective cover than darkness."

"For smuggling, you mean?"

"What else? Practically everyone is involved in it, from Kent all the way along the south coast to Cornwall. If it comes to that, nearly the whole of England is involved in it. Anyone who buys a pound of smuggled tea or a keg of smuggled brandy is involved in it, and few are averse to either—even those who rant against the trade."

The horses wheeled sharply and the carriage took a right turn, following the road inland. Samantha glanced back over her shoulder at that unreal world far below and saw it drop away as abruptly as it had appeared, concealed once again by the high ridge below which the sea had once foamed and swirled. Quite suddenly, the marsh might never have been there at all; she might have been looking at a mirage.

They lost sight of the abbey as they drove through the village of Appledore. But turning onto the road leading to Hawksmere, the towers were once more etched against the sky, and the wind hurled itself in their faces, just as for centuries it had hurled itself against those solid stone walls. It was more like a fortress than an abbey, Samantha reflected.

She was surprised by the short approach to it. There was nothing but a very large courtyard between the rough lane and the massive front doors. The building faced inland, its back toward that brooding skyline and misty marsh far below, and they were able to drive straight into the courtyard because the gatekeeper's lodge stood empty and the huge gates lolled open on immense, rusted hinges. The whole place had an air of indifference about it that shocked her. Nothing could have presented greater evidence of Uncle Jonothan's befuddled state of mind than this.

Richard halted before the main doors, sprang down, and jangled a heavy iron bellpull. He then wielded a great iron knocker, calling loudly to Martha Piper to open up at once.

"She's a lazy slut. She will take her time," he said as he turned to help Samantha down.

But to his surprise, both solid doors opened immediately,

giving the impression that someone had been watching their arrival. The woman who awaited them was no slut, Samantha noted. She wore a spotless white apron over a neat black gown, an immaculate cap on carefully combed, iron-gray hair, and everything about her was clean.

Richard stared in astonishment, then burst out, "Good God, Piper, I never expected this! Thank you for showing so much courtesy to my sister."

"It's not for your sister," she snapped. "It's for *him*. His orders, without so much as a greeting. Took one look at me, he did, and told me to go and clean myself up or find other employment, and after all the years I've been at Hawksmere!"

"*You mean—*" Dick peered through the doors over Piper's shoulder.

"Aye. The new master is here. Waiting for you. *You're* in for it, too. Shouldn't have taken the grays without a by-your-leave, or the carriage, *or* fetched your sister." There was relish in the woman's voice. "You're certainly in for it, Master Richard—and about time, if you ask me."

"I do not ask you," Richard answered coldly, and taking his sister's arm, he led her up the steps.

The chill of the woman's words was deepened by the chill of a vast, raftered hall. The floor was stone flagged, the walls lined with ancient linenfold paneling, and a long refectory table of oak, probably left from the days when the monks dined here, stretched almost the length of the hall, and was flanked by ancient oak benches on either side and by single tall-backed chairs at either end.

"And I'll tell you this," Martha Piper hurled after them, "you're in for an even bigger surprise."

Richard was about to speak when a door at the far end was flung open and light streamed across the stone floor. Samantha saw tall, lead-lighted windows beyond the door, and the wild sea sky behind them, but the man silhouetted in the aperture made a far greater impact on her mind. Tall, immensely broad, with a full head of curling copper hair, his strong legs set in a stance that proclaimed his anger, the whole force of his personality was overpowering. This was not a man to be dismissed as an intruder; this was a man to be reckoned with, and to be feared; an intensely physical man. A proud, arrogant, overwhelming man who, even if hated, could never be forgotten.

Chapter 4



"Richard Kimbolt?" Mark Chaters blazed in a deep, gravelly voice. "I gave you leave to remain in this house, but not to make free with my possessions—nor to take it for granted that my hospitality would be extended to any relative you chose to bring here."

"Sir—I—I—"

"You assumed I wouldn't mind? Is that what you are trying to say?"

"My aunt's letter spoke for itself, surely. I left it on the library desk."

"Indeed, it spoke for itself! It said plainly enough that she wanted to be rid of a young woman who was of no use to her. Then why should she be of any use to me? God knows this place needs taking in hand, and taken in hand it shall be, but not by some witless creature who cannot even make herself useful in an old maid's establishment!"

Samantha drew herself up and marched the full length of the hall. She planted herself squarely in front of him.

"I am *not* witless, sir. Nor did I cease to be of use to my aunt. She dispatched me from her house because I dared to stand up to her for three interminable years, and because she did not want the trouble of finding a husband for me."

Chaters looked down at her appraisingly. "I can well imagine the difficulty of finding a husband for a young woman with so sharp a tongue."

"Be that as it may, *sir*," she flung back at him, lifting her chin high, "I would not remain beneath your roof if you offered me the most princely salary and comfortable accommodation this neglected place could provide. No wonder the Kimbolts think the will should be contested! For once, I am in accord with them. An ill-mannered boor should never be master of Hawksmere. *Vous êtes bien un cochon!*" she added.

Mark Chaters looked at her for one astonished moment, then gave a shout of laughter. She spun away from him, but he seized her arm, spinning her around.

"You think I am a pig, do you? Well, Miss Kimbolt, this ill-mannered boor *will* be master. And, what is more, you will remain and serve him. I have a sudden notion you may be heaven-sent after all. So, like it or not, you will remain. Your fluent French, although rude, is providential. The fact that you are young is an additional asset. Come into the library, the pair of you. Fetch wine, Piper. The best Burgundy my late stepfather's cellar can yield, and in a clean decanter—if you can produce one."

Richard gave a sigh of relief. "Thank God you were only joking, *sir*, about casting my sister out. For a moment I took you to be serious."

"Then you change your mind very quickly," Samantha remarked with a sting in her voice, removing her arm from his strong grip.

"Let us say you changed it for me." His cool hazel eyes mocked her as he gave her a gentle push and propelled her before him. She went reluctantly, still furious. She hated this man as she had never hated anyone before. There must be *some* bolt hole in a situation such as this, she thought despairingly, knowing full well there was none.

When the door closed, he promptly untied her cloak and held it at arm's length, studying it distastefully.

"*That* can be got rid of." He dropped it on the floor. "So can that dun-colored gown you are wearing." For a moment she thought he was about to rip it off her. Undoubtedly he had done that to many a wench—he seemed the sort of man who would use a woman for his own pleasure, whenever and wherever he chose. He continued, "Germaine is French, and fastidious about clothes. Garments like these would offend her eye."

"Germaine?" echoed Richard.

"Germaine de la Roche. I have brought her here to become my wife, as soon as it can be arranged."

Samantha drew her breath in sharply and clasped her hands together before her. "I would have you know, sir, that these garments already offend *my* eye. Only my aunt's penchant for dowdiness has forced me to wear the clothes you find so distasteful. If your indulged fiancée is so desirous of having only elegance around her, perhaps I am not the companion you seek."

But he was already surveying her, his eye running up and down her slender form, noting the delectable waist and high, rounded breasts, then the line from hip to ankle.

Incensed by his cool appraisal, she returned his scrutiny. His face was narrow, with a long, straight mouth which, but for the sensual lower lip, would have been aesthetic. By no means could he be called handsome, but he possessed an animal grace that reminded Samantha of the inscrutable elegance portrayed in Nicholas Hillyarde's miniatures of Elizabethan courtiers . . . the Earl of Essex . . . Sir Walter Raleigh . . . he could have passed for either, had he not been clean-shaven.

His composure was absolute. Beneath his calm appraisal her own glance faltered, and as her eyes fell he said in clipped tones, "I would have you know, Miss Kimbolt, that my dear Germaine arrived in this country only yesterday, after endless suffering. Her escape from France was indeed harrowing, hence my desire that she shall no longer be reminded of it. And why should you complain? If I choose to dress you becomingly to please my fiancée, *you* will benefit substantially."

The setdown was hers. She was shocked by the revelation that Germaine de la Roche was a fugitive from the horror raging on those opposite shores.

"I—I am sorry. I did not realize—"

He turned away, the steely glint in his eye softened a little by her apology, but still reminding her that he could be a totally unforgiving man. Mercifully, a deferential tap on the door heralded Piper again. She bore a silver tray that showed signs of hurried and inadequate polishing, and a decanter and glasses that were rather smeared. But the Burgundy was good. Uncle Jonothan had obviously been a connoisseur.

When they were alone again, Mark Chaters continued. "I brought my fiancée straight to Hawksmere because conven-

tion forbids that she should live beneath the same roof as myself until she is my wife—not that I personally give a damn for convention, but Germaine has been strictly brought up. Also, the spartan bachelor quarters above my boatyard at Folkestone are quite unsuitable for someone so delicately nurtured. Her home was a chateau in the Val de Loire, and Hawksmere, I imagined, would be the nearest equivalent. I accepted the inheritance only because I believed it would make a worthy home for her.”

“Abel Hardwick worked speedily, transferring the property to you so soon,” Richard ventured. Samantha noted a somewhat sarcastic note in his voice.

“If you are implying that I took possession prematurely, you are right. But who else can validly lay claim to the place? And I have not yet taken up permanent residence, though I most certainly will do so now that another woman has arrived to act as my fiancée’s chaperone. I can tell, Miss Kimbolt,” he turned to her with a critical glint in his gray-green eyes, “you are shocked with the condition of things here. You have noticed the dust, the smeared silver and glass, the state of the curtains and carpets.”

Samantha could not deny it. “Your betrothed must have been appalled,” she answered.

“She scarcely noticed, thank God. She took to her bed and stayed there, exhausted by a long and nerve-wracking journey. Hardwick raised a feeble protest when I installed her here, but I dealt with that.”

Samantha could well believe it. This aggressive man, with his blazing copper hair and determined chin, would deal with anyone and beat them every time. What a boor! What an arrogant, determined, opinionated boor! She detested him.

“The title deeds will be mine within a matter of hours. I hustled my own solicitors in case anyone should attempt to thwart me,” he went on, flinging his powerful body into a tall winged chair opposite her own, and thrusting out his long legs toward the fire. The strength of those legs seemed as aggressive as his voice, the thighs well muscled beneath skintight buckskins.

Samantha forced her eyes away, startled by a reaction she had never experienced before. But then, she had never met a man like this before. His body was compelling, and she was disturbed by the thoughts it conjured up.

“I don’t give a damn for anyone’s objections. This place is now mine, and I want it only because Germaine will be safe

here. The next step is to turn Hawksmere into a home worthy of her." He looked from one to the other of them, his glance finally settling on Samantha. "You may be aware of the condition in which French refugees reach these shores, physically and very often mentally exhausted?"

She nodded.

"For months," Chaters explained as he folded his massive hands in his lap, "I had been trying to organize Germaine's escape, but it was not easy—"

Richard interrupted, "Surely, if you had married her in France you could have brought her over in safety as the wife of an Englishman?"

"I wanted to do so, but Germaine refused to leave her parents to the mercy of the Commune. She was anxious to get them into Switzerland because her mother had set her heart on being with her sister in Zurich, a widow, and her only relative. And in neutral Switzerland her politically prominent father would be safe. So I was forced to wait, and meanwhile, do my best to organize Germaine's escape to England when the time came. I asked no questions about the vessel that was willing to bring a passenger illegally, I merely paid the price."

"So it was not difficult for you to smuggle Mademoiselle de la Roche here," Richard said, stimulated by the story and, Samantha suspected, by the wine.

"It would not have been, had her parents managed to get away. Tragically, they were caught and taken to Paris where they were imprisoned and finally guillotined. Germaine was hidden by loyal tenants for many weeks, until it was unsafe to hide her any longer. Somehow she survived, but the hardship of the journey took its toll in addition to the shock and distress she had endured."

"It must have been an anxious time for you," Samantha remarked inadequately. Once again she was aware of the man's compelling looks. Now the light fell upon him, she was able to observe his features in greater detail. She had not thought him attractive, but now she looked more closely and realized that his craggy face, with its ill-assorted features, somehow achieved the effect of handsomeness. His cheekbones as well as his forehead were high, the nose strongly bridged and prominent. As for that wide mouth, with its sensual lower lip, she judged that it could be tender as well as ruthless. She found herself wondering how it would feel against her own, but quickly switched her concentration to his chin. The hard thrust of it testified to his arrogance, but also

to an aggressive courage and determination. His eyes were a deep gray that seemed to change from hazel to green to gray with the light and his mood. Their gaze was penetrating and inescapable.

His hair was tied carelessly on the nape of his neck. This was matched by the carelessness of his attire, but gave an illogical impression of elegance—a loose shirt of the finest cambric left open almost to the waist revealed a muscular chest thatched with deep rust-colored curling hair; a spotless white neckerchief was knotted casually about his throat; wide sleeves were gathered into deep cuffs round sinewy wrists that led to work-worn, calloused hands. The well-cut breeches of softest leather somehow emphasized the strength of limbs and the ripple of muscles beneath, and his deeply cuffed jockey boots with suede turndowns finished just above strong calves. He might not be a likeable man, but he was certainly a noticeable one.

His skin was weathered. Against the deep tan, his red hair looked even brighter, and his stance conveyed the impression of a powerful mind and a physical strength that bore testimony to his trade. He was a man who had done more than pore over plans and papers; his muscular body gave testimony to the fact that he had a working knowledge of boat building. It was a pity, Samantha thought, he had no knowledge of good manners. How had a man with such a blunt and overbearing personality won the heart of a delicately nurtured Frenchwoman?

She realized that just as she was studying him, so he was studying her.

"Yes," he murmured absently, "an anxious time . . ." But as he spoke, his eyes moved from her face to her throat, from her throat to her breasts, and there his eyes lingered. She was aware of his penetrating glance and her blood leapt. It was exciting yet somehow frightening—almost as if he had reached out and touched her. Immediately, she lowered her eyes, only to look up a moment later to see his attention now focused on her face. Their intense glances met, held, and challenged one another. Samantha was increasingly conscious of him as a man with a magnificent body, who made her equally conscious of her feminine one. And on his part? He was aware of her body, too, of that she was certain.

She looked away, fixing her glance on the storm-tossed sky beyond the window. What sort of a place had she come to, and what kind of man was this she would be working for? One

thing was certain—she would never bend the knee to him, and she would fight his physical attraction by fostering her earlier dislike. Somehow she felt threatened by Mark Chaters, aware that he could trouble both her peace of mind and body. To dwell beneath the same roof in anything but the role of antagonist spelled danger of a kind she did not want.

Besides, there was already a woman in his life, one he intended to marry. So any meaningful glance he turned on another could have only one motivation—an unscrupulous lust which, she guessed, he was accustomed to satisfying. Did he assume that, as a mere chattel in his house, *she* could be used as he pleased? God in Heaven, he would get a sharp setback if he so much as tried!

Bolstered by renewed anger, she was able to get control of herself and turn her attention to Richard, who was now quaffing wine with happy abandon and plainly unaware of any underlying emotional tension in the room. "You have achieved one result in a remarkably short time, sir," he said gaily. "I failed to recognize Piper—washed and polished!"

Mark Chaters glanced at him, replaced the stopper in the decanter, and said pointedly, "Wine in, wits out. Remember that, young Kimbolt. As for Piper, I gave her a couple of hours to unearth clean aprons from the closets. I remembered that she wore them when my mother was mistress here. I could not allow her to enter Germaine's room until she was presentable."

Richard laughed and thrust his hands into his pockets. "Presentable, today, perhaps, but it won't last long. I knew you'd be glad of Sam's services, and I'm deuced pleased you have come around to the idea."

"That she should take Piper's place? Of course, I haven't. I have other plans for your sister. Until Germaine is well and has adjusted to our ways, Samantha will be a companion for her. I see she speaks French." He smiled, turning to Samantha. "You do know more than to curse at a man, I trust? Germaine can speak some English, but will be lonely in my absence. I have to visit the boatyard daily, and Folkestone is many miles from here. I must leave early in the day and the long ride back will mean a late return. Your company will serve admirably." His eyes held hers for a moment. "How does my proposition appeal to you?"

She answered in stilted tones, "As you pointed out, I have little choice."

He taunted, "Then you, too, change your mind quickly. Less than five minutes ago you were declaring that not for the most handsome salary would you remain beneath my roof." He smiled, and his face broke into wide creases. "Come, let us call a truce. We can serve each other's purpose, you and I. As for your brother, as I told you, he shall serve me, too. The estate as well as the house must be put in order. At one time the Kimbolt sheep were on a par with any on the marsh. My stepfather let the stock decline deplorably. From the look of things, he had not bought a good ram for a very long time."

"You observed a lot very quickly," Samantha said a trifle tartly. She found that any criticism of her tragic uncle put her on the defensive.

At that, Chaters rose, took her by the arm again, and led her to the window. There was almost a sheer drop to the marsh below. "Look down there. Look at those sheep—hundreds of them, and the finest in the world. Sheep mean gold in these parts. Dutch and Flemish weavers clamor for Romney wool. Hawksmere should have its share of the profits. I mean to see that it gets it. Now come with me—"

He led her to the other end of the room, away from the marsh, to a window overlooking untidy grounds and then rough fields inhabited by a flock of scruffy sheep. Even Samantha, who had lived most of her life in towns and cities, could see that they were inferior and neglected.

"God damn it, young Kimbolt, come over here and look at these sheep! Not only do the poor animals need tending, but look at those boundaries! How many years is it since a decent job of hedge-laying was done?" His forthright glance settled on her brother, who promptly put down his wine glass and joined them. "Devil take it," Mark exclaimed. "Someone has made a fine mill of things! I tell you this, the state of affairs here is a challenge I intend to meet and, what's more, I intend that *you* shall, too." He emphasized the words with a forceful thrust of a strong forefinger against Richard's shoulder. "And mark this also. You may think you have a right to stay, but I am resolved that you shall earn it by working, as your sister will. She will supervise the household until Germaine becomes mistress here, and you will be in charge of things outside. We must make a new start in every way, restock and replenish. Hawksmere once owned the most prosperous farmlands in the area and it must do so again. But I am a boatbuilder and my business is demanding. I know many

farmers this side of Canterbury, and I have the money to pay them. I will seek their help and arrange things, but you will have to do your share."

"And I?" Samantha put in, her azure-colored eyes shining anxiously. "What will you arrange for me when Mademoiselle de la Roche becomes your wife and is able to do without me? That puts a time limit on my employment."

"You have a quick tongue in your head, Samantha Kimbolt. Being an old lady's companion doesn't seem to have subdued your spirits. Well, that is all to the good. It means you should be able to face up to problems. As for what will happen to you when Germaine becomes mistress of Hawksmere, do not fear. You will still have your uses."

What uses? she wanted to demand. The uses a man like you has for all women? But she kept silent and cast her eyes down.

He continued briskly, "You and Germaine should get along well together, for she has spirit, too. She could never have survived all she has gone through, otherwise. But she will be lonely in a strange land, and a husband cannot be with his wife all the time. It will be good for her to have a companion of her own age. Yes, I think it will be a very satisfactory arrangement all around."

As he turned to walk past her, he caught sight of her brother's face. Dick was evidently put out.

"Hell's teeth, why so blue-deviled, boy? Doesn't the prospect of farming appeal to you?" The new master of Hawksmere looked from one to the other in exasperation. "What am I to make of the pair of you? I should have thought you would be glad to live at Hawksmere. After all, the place would have been Richard's if your father had not been booted out."

Samantha said stonily, "He left of his own accord, and if the day comes when my brother and I think we should do the same, we will. Won't we, Dick?" Without giving him a chance to speak, she ran on, "Meanwhile, Mr. Chaters, I accept your offer of work, providing," she finished with bravado, "your terms are agreeable."

His brow furrowed. "Can you afford to be so independent?"

"Independence is the only thing I have left to cling to, sir."

He raised his eyebrows, and his mouth quirked ironically, but there seemed to be some other quality in his glance, a sort of admiration that she was reluctant to credit.

"Well now," he said briskly, stepping to the mantelpiece and resting his hands on it, "since your sister demands to know my terms, let us hear the figure my stepfather has been allowing you, Richard. From your clothes, it would appear to have been excellent. We cannot have your sister badly dressed by comparison."

Dick named a rather substantial sum, adding that he really had no idea how much Uncle Jonothan spent on him. "He let me order whatever I wanted, and the bills went to him."

"To be left unpaid. I have been through a stack of them. What struck me was that few of my stepfather's debts had been incurred by you. They were mostly from merchants, many refusing to supply him further. But all will be dealt with in time. I can only say that if you managed on the allowance you mention, you have been lucky in finding an excellent and remarkably inexpensive tailor." Before Richard could reply, he continued, "You will both be paid well, but you, young sir, will earn a bonus on profits when they start coming in. It is up to you to see that they do, but don't forget I will be watching. I think that's enough to go on with. We will get down to practical details at supper tonight."

With an abrupt gesture, he pulled a frayed bell rope beside the fireplace. Martha Piper answered with an alacrity which, from Dick's expression of total shock, Samantha suspected the housekeeper had not shown for years.

"Prepare the bedroom next door to Mademoiselle de la Roche," Chaters ordered. "Miss Kimbolt will occupy it."

The woman's jaw dropped open in surprise.

"But it's one of the best rooms in the house, sir!"

"I am aware of that. Miss Kimbolt's position here will be important. She will supervise the household until mademoiselle becomes my wife and is ready to take over."

"But *I* am housekeeper here!" The woman's voice was tight with rage.

"You surprise me. From the look of the place I imagined no one had supervised it since my mother's death."

"Well, it's over big for a small staff to run," Piper muttered resentfully. "I do my best, with only a couple of housemaids and Mrs. Thomas to do the cooking." Martha shrugged in despair.

"Then you will be glad of someone to take the responsibility off your shoulders," Mark said blandly. "From now on you will take your orders from Miss Kimbolt."

The woman bobbed a nervous curtsy and departed, but

not before glancing balefully at Samantha from beneath her heavy brows. There was open hostility there, and suspicion, too. Samantha could see she was wondering how this newcomer had wormed her way to the top so successfully and so quickly. She also suspected the woman resented the idea of taking orders from a young spinster. Oh dear, Samantha sighed inwardly. She knew she had made an enemy from the start, and she didn't like that one bit.

Chapter 5



Mark Chaters stood by the ornate mantel, surveying brother and sister with a keen eye. What in the world had prompted Uncle Jonothan to leave Hawksmere to this man, Samantha wondered in astonishment.

Richard moved to the door. "If you will excuse me, sir, I must be about unpacking items I purchased in London," he said. "See you at dinner, Sam." He was more subdued than at any time since their reunion, and Samantha was not wholly surprised. Neither had expected to find the new owner of their family estate so disconcerting.

Her brother was halfway through the door when the new master of Hawksmere said, "You will drive your sister to Hythe tomorrow, to replenish her wardrobe." Chaters strode across the room as Richard left, and stood beside Samantha. "I acknowledge that you have some sense of style, Miss Kimbolt, though that unbecoming mobcap belies it." With an impatient gesture, he pulled it off, and Samantha's golden tresses streamed down her back. Confusion vied with embarrassment as she reached up and fussed with it anxiously. She wished she had thought to coil it decorously this morning and so avoid this man's keen inspection. He put out a hand and lifted a few strands, letting them run through his fingers.

"Smuggler's gold never looked more bright than this, Samantha Kimbolt," he noted appreciatively. "Oblige me by never covering it again."

"Very well, sir." She felt the color come into her cheeks. He was so close to her!

"How you dislike addressing me that way! I dislike it, too, so pray drop the 'sir.' I shall be Mark to you and you will be Richard and Samantha to me. Or—," he stopped, an inscrutable expression suddenly covering his face, "—do you prefer 'Sam'?"

She blushed a deeper red. "That is my brother's pet name for me, and thank you, I prefer Samantha." The man was infuriating—she could tell he was smiling at her although she did not dare to meet his glance.

"Servility does not come easily to you, I can tell," he said. "Nor do I like it." His eyes raked her from head to foot. "You will find the modiste in Hythe very talented. Was it you who made the most of that dull material you are wearing? I recall that your aunt said in her letter that you were adept with your needle."

Mollified, she inclined her head, accepting his oblique apology. She wished she could simply walk out of the room, as Dick had done, but somehow she felt that she had to remain until her new employer dismissed her. If only he would stop staring at her! She knew that she was prone to blushing whenever she felt self-conscious.

To conceal an unexpected shyness, she strolled the length of the library, examining the endless, dusty shelves. It looked as if no one had taken a volume from them for years. Here and there, fragments of faded yellow parchment projected, tattered and torn, between bindings of embossed calf, giving evidence that once upon a time, long ago, someone in this household had dipped into them. She took down a volume idly, blowing dust off it in a cloud and, clapping its covers together, she blew more out. The little explosion did her good and released her pent-up tension.

"Sermons," she commented, glancing at the pages. "These must have belonged to Uncle Simeon. I wouldn't imagine poor Uncle Jonothan reading these, from what I've heard of him."

Mark Chaters let out a hearty laugh. "Indeed not. My stepfather—how shall I put this?—he never walked hand-in-hand with God."

What a strange comment, Samantha thought as she strolled

on, trailing a negligent finger along the rows, scarcely glancing at the titles. Chaters was a mysterious person, and he certainly made no attempt to contain his enmity toward his stepfather, despite the fact that the old man had made him a generous inheritance. She wondered if she would ever learn what the cause of their disagreement was.

But right now, the room, and not the man, demanded her attention. The tall, lead-lighted windows from floor to ceiling at each end were hung with faded damask, so threadbare that she felt they would crumble at a touch. What color had they been originally? Yellow? They were gray with age and dust now, like tired ghosts. The tooled leather top of a library table was ring-marked and ink stained, similarly was the vast oak desk at which Uncle Jonothan had written his poetry—a sad, romantic man, if she were to believe Dick's stories. At least there would be plenty to keep her busy here, and it would be more enjoyable than sitting beside an inadequate fire in Wimpole Street, reading aloud to Aunt Charlotte.

As she walked, she was intensely aware of Mark Chaters's scrutiny. His eyes followed her closely. Perhaps he was wondering if he had made a good bargain in employing her. Well, she reflected philosophically, he would find out and so would she. But why would he not turn his penetrating glance away! It seemed to hover disconcertingly on her breasts, and then on her mouth, then to her throat and once more to her breasts, then lower to waist and hip and thigh, making her aware that her merino gown moved as her limbs moved.

Although she was accustomed to men's glances, Chaters disconcerted her in a way she had never been before. He examined her as the Frenchmen had when she was growing up in Picardy—with open speculation, assessing her potential in the way a connoisseur eyes a work of art. Mark Chaters's every glance made her aware of her own body, and she turned aside to conceal her heightened color.

Unexpectedly, she found him at her side.

"I like the way you move, Samantha. I like the sway of your hips and the grace of your stride. You have a shapely body beneath that drab gown, and I'll warrant your flesh is comely."

"Is this your normal approach to women?" she answered sharply, her eyes flashing with anger.

"To attractive ones, yes."

"Then you are impertinent, sir."

"Don't assume outraged virtue with me, you golden rebel."

No young woman who looks like you and has a body like yours can have remained a virgin past her very early youth." His hand touched her throat, then slid down to the swell of her breasts above the low neck of her gown. But indeed, she had only herself to blame for Mark's bold overture now. Common sense should have told her that casting off the lace insertion of her gown and exposing the hint of a valley between her breasts, the soft domes uplifted by the lacing of her bodice, had been an open invitation to any man. The touch of Mark's fingers sent potent delight through her. Angered with herself as much as with him, she thrust his hand aside.

"Don't jump to wrong conclusions," she warned, "and remember that I am your employee only because I have no other choice—as yet."

He laughed, seized her, and brought his mouth down upon hers. His lips were open, and she felt them encompass her own. Then a savage yet tender tongue probed in her mouth as his right hand unlaced her bodice until he found and cupped her breast. Her sense reeled at his touch. She felt both breasts swell and tighten as the nipples rose to meet his hand. Dizziness and a hot surge of physical desire made her weak, and when his mouth left hers and stooped to take possession of her breast, kissing it with a passion that matched the heat of her own, she was unaware that she swayed and moaned beneath the ecstasy of it. His lips moved to her throat, his fingers softly caressing the nipple his mouth had fondled.

He kissed her lips again, consuming her mouth now with a hunger that brought an answering response from her own as the longing in her flesh throbbed more rapidly, more insistently. Both strong arms held her tightly against him so that she felt his hard, demanding manhood upright against her thigh. Then he moved, forcing her legs apart and pressing between them. She felt his frustration at the barrier of her clothing, then his hand was lifting her skirts, his fingers on her flesh beneath. She made a wild grasp at sanity. She would allow no man to rape her, least of all this one, a man so ruthless in his dealings with women that he could be hell-bent on seducing one, while loving and planning to marry another.

"*Bastard!*" she cried, eluding him with one swift movement. Startled, he let go of her and she brought her arm up, striking him hard across the face. She was emotionally shaken, the heat of her passion fired even more by the heat of her rage. He stared at her, saw her trembling and the fire in

her eyes, the breathless rise and fall of her breasts. She leaned against a table for support and glared at him with fury in her eyes—but with some other emotion as well.

As he had thought, she was no milk-and-water creature; she had aroused his passion and he had aroused hers. She was fully aware of the messages sent by his mouth, his tongue, his caressing hands and the urgent pressure of the most intimate part of his body between her thighs.

"Don't pretend to be a plaster saint," he growled. "That lusty body of yours knows and needs the delights of love. That much is evident."

How could she tell him that she had never in her life been touched so by a man? He would not believe her. He would avow that she must have slipped away from her sedate aunt's household to rendezvous sometime . . . somewhere. How else could she have yielded to him so instinctively? He would call her a liar, and despise her for it, for pretended virtue would be no recommendation to a man like Mark Chaters. In fact she, too, was astounded at her reaction. Although she had often dreamed of a man taking her in his arms, she had not imagined herself to be so physically ready for his advances.

She drew herself up, smoothed her gown, and said lightly, "I prefer to choose my lovers rather than have them thrust upon me . . . and among my lovers I do not care to include the fiancé of another woman. Go to *her* for your pleasures. And remember this—I may be your employee, but not your property to do with as you will. I am my own mistress and will never be yours."

Anger had claimed her wholly now. He knew it, and was stirred by it. What was she, with her mane of golden hair and fiery body—angel or devil? What power did she possess that he should so lose his head? And yet she had simply walked into his life and made him forget everything and everyone, even his delicate little fiancée, in a sudden desire to possess her.

He thrust aside his sense of shame. Anyone so physically ripe as Samantha Kimbolt justified a man's assumptions, but at the same time, he was keenly aware that there was contempt in her wild blue eyes as she reminded him of his obligation to Germaine. He had the uncomfortable feeling that he had fallen in her estimation. No matter. As she said, she was an employee in his house. He could send her packing any time he wished.

There was silence between them. At last she said with icy civility, "Have I your permission to leave, sir?"

"Not to leave this house, Samantha."

Her tone became more biting. "Unfortunately, I cannot do that since, as you know, I am penniless. I suppose that gives you a sense of power over me, but to my mind it gives you only the right to issue orders, which is why I am asking your permission to go to my room."

"I doubt if it will be ready yet. No. I do not dismiss you." He smiled and noted her discomfort as she hastily laced up her bodice. "For the moment you can remain here and engage in conversation with me. That will not outrage your virtue, I trust?"

He was the most sarcastic, conceited, arrogant man she had ever met. She would enjoy nothing so much as snubbing him, yet even now a lingering heat in her blood would not let her forget his power to rouse her physically. Lust—that was all it was, of course. She would not answer him, she would simply remain in his presence and let him converse with himself.

"You were wondering a short while ago," he began, as he adjusted the buttons of his cuffs, "just why your uncle left this place to a stepson whom he had not seen for a long time and who never bothered to visit him."

Samantha stared at him, startled. In addition to an overbearing personality, did he also possess the power to read one's thoughts?

"I will tell you why he left Hawksmere to me," Mark went on. "As atonement. He had a sense of guilt, and not without cause."

There was a chill in the room, razor-edged with suspicion. Then her defenses went up. If he intended to embark on some derogatory story about poor Uncle Jonothan, she would not listen. She felt defensive about her uncle whom she imagined as a pathetic and lonely man, forced to seek solace in alcohol. On the journey from London her brother had told her how the old man used to shut himself up, writing poetry. One of the young maids, the one called Alice, had told him how she would often answer his summons for another bottle and find him sitting at the library desk, scrawling endlessly, and how the hearth would be littered with crumpled sheets. Samantha could only pity Jonothan, who had ended up a forgotten old man, out of touch with his family, and even with his stepson.

She crossed the room without answering Mark and went to

the immense Gothic fireplace, where she sat down on a long, tapestry-covered fender stool, and spread her hands to the blaze. The room smelled musty and airless. How long since a window had been opened? She let her thoughts wander away from the subject of Uncle Jonothan—and, particularly, away from those wild moments in Mark's arms.

"You don't ask why my stepfather had a sense of guilt," he said persistently, coming closer to her and sitting on a matching stool at the opposite side of the fireplace. "That means you don't want to know."

"You are right. If you quarreled with him, it is no affair of mine."

"But I did get on with him, once upon a time."

"Yet on your own admission you never bothered to visit him. Perhaps you are simply a cold-hearted man, indifferent to the feelings of others." She looked at him, hoping her words had hit home. "Particular to a lonely old man who died unloved by anyone except my brother, who was too young and perhaps too feckless to take more than occasional thought for his benefactor."

"And I was his stepson and therefore had a responsibility toward him. That is what you are thinking, is it not?"

"Please. Spare me your tedious tirade against a man who was generous enough to leave everything he possessed to you, and which you were not above accepting. Any tale of woe leveled against my unfortunate uncle will fall on deaf ears."

She had gone too far. She saw a blaze of angry color surge to his face. His mouth tightened and his eyes grew dark with rage. He rose, pushing aside his footstool so violently that it fell with a crash on the bare oak floor.

"And I warn you, Samantha Kimbolt—"

A tilt of her stubborn chin hid her flicker of fear.

"Of what, pray? Of being familiar with the master of the house?" That was unfortunate wording, and she hastily put it right. "I mean familiar in manner, of course, sir. Impertinent, bold and outspoken. Would you have me meek and humbling myself before you? If so, you have invited the wrong person to remain beneath your roof."

His blaze of anger ended as suddenly as it had begun, and he gave forth with another shout of laughter.

"Hell's teeth, I can tell as much! You have the impudence of the devil, you vixen."

"And you, apparently, have a heart of stone, else you would have had compassion and not left my uncle to die alone and friendless."

"Other people have their tragedies, too," he answered soberly.

"Oh? You don't appear to have suffered as a result of it. You own a prosperous industry and now you own all this as well. You have no cause for complaint."

She had said more than was proper now, and she knew it, but being silent had never been part of her nature.

He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and turned away. A few strides, and he was by the far window, staring out upon unkempt lawns bounded by a stone wall that formed a barrier between Hawksmere's grounds and the sheer cliffs pitching down to the marsh below. He was glad she could not see his face, for the pain of memory was sharp, and he had no means to hide his feelings in this matter.

Nor could he hide what he felt about Samantha Kimbolt. He was enraged as well as tempted by this woman. Even now, with his back to her, he was conscious of her presence. He could hear her light breathing in the silent room. It had a disturbing, feminine quality. Did she breathe like that when she slept, her breasts rising and falling in a fashion that would drive any man mad? And why in the name of God did he think of such a thing now? Why did he have to think of her at all?

He spun around, seized her arm and angrily pulled her to her feet. "I think it high time you met the future mistress of Hawksmere," he barked. "Come along."

He pulled her after him into the long, stone-floored hall from which a wide staircase of solid oak curved upward on one side. The treads were bare and shallow and badly in need of polishing, the carved banisters thick with dust, the crevices, in a design of grapevine and leaf, almost obscured by it. From the far end, a minstrels' gallery looked down; no doubt the abbot himself had dined here in Hawksmere's monasterial days. Afterward it had at last echoed to music and gaiety in a hall that had become baronial. The monks of long ago were replaced by dancing figures arrayed in silks and satins and jewels, dissipating their time in wanton lovemaking, taking luxury and licentiousness for granted.

As he led this disturbing young woman—a true inheritor of all the Kimbolt ancestors judging by her wild spirits—up the sweeping staircase, he hoped he had done right by deciding

that she should remain at Hawksmere. Surely her strength of character would be just what Germaine needed. Cossetted in her aristocratic French home, his fiancée was too gentle to stand up to the rigors of harsh reality; she could be intimidated by rough servants, especially by a crude woman like Martha Piper. Of course, the contrast between his fiancée and this hot-blooded young woman beside him could not be stronger. Germaine was as petite and delicate as a piece of Dresden china; Samantha was tall and lissome and courageous, well capable of standing on her own two feet.

Mark stopped his thoughts when he began to recollect what had taken place with this exciting creature in the library. In a way, he regretted taking leave of his senses and yielding to the temptation of her; in another, he did not. How could any full-blooded man regret sampling the warmth and passion of such a woman? A quiet, subdued mouse, he had thought her at first glance—but oh, how wrong he had been!

Even though, he was forced to recall, she had rejected his advances. Despite the fire of Samantha Kimbolt's nature, Mark knew she was not to be bought. He could easily differentiate between women who could be bedded for cash and those who only did it for love—and in this latter category he now included Samantha. And she had done right to remind him of Germaine, for in making love to another woman while his fiancée lay helpless upstairs, he was worthy of her contempt.

He refused to look at Samantha further as they made their way to Germaine's room. She was an employee in his household now—that was all she would ever be to him.

Chapter 6



Samantha would never forget her first sight of Germaine de la Roche. She lay against banked pillows, her dark hair spread out about her and her eyes enormous in a delicate cameo of a face. She looked diminutive in the great four-poster bed, overpowered by the tester above. And yet that canopy lent a regal air to the room, and somehow her presence seemed to add to it. Pale, exhausted, and tiny as she was, she still managed to dominate the scene.

"I have brought someone to meet you, my love. Someone who will keep you company in my absence." Mark hastened to her side and, sitting on the edge of the bed, he took her small hands in his huge ones.

From domineering aggression he had changed to gentleness in the space of minutes. Samantha felt an unaccountable envy for the delicate Mademoiselle de la Roche, unwillingly comparing Mark's new tenderness with the wild demands he had made on her. Moreover, he had made it plain, on her arrival, that she would do as *he* said, as *he* wished. For this girl, on the other hand, there would be indulgence and softness and indescribable sweetness, and all the passion of his manhood as well. Never had Samantha bemoaned her lot or coveted that of others, but now, suddenly, she longed to change

places with the girl in the bed and have this man stooping over her as he now did.

His abundant red hair brushed the chestnut tresses spread out on the pillow, and the strong masculine face lay against the pretty feminine one, his lips touching her cheek. Never had Samantha felt like such an intruder. Mark had insisted on bringing her here, and now it seemed he had forgotten her. But her desire to escape had a stronger compulsion. To see a man whom one did not desire, kiss another woman, meant nothing. But when that man was capable of stirring one's own blood, the experience was unbearable.

She did not want to acknowledge her own overpowering desire and need to feel her body sinking into the deep feather bed beneath his weight. She turned her head aside quickly and started for the door. But as she did so, she caught sight of Germaine's eyes, watching her over Mark's shoulder, their expression totally out of keeping with such a tender moment. She was gazing at Samantha with a look of detached curiosity that said all too plainly that she wanted to know who this golden-haired creature in her bedroom was. How such a question could come into the young woman's mind when her fiance's lips were so close, Samantha could not even comprehend.

Mark lifted his head and, still stroking his love's rich hair, he gazed at Germaine with what Samantha took to be unabashed adoration. The girl's dark eyes promptly turned to him. There was no sign of speculation in them now; nothing but the sweetness and gentleness of love, overlaid by a helpless bewilderment that made her cling to him desperately. She lifted slender arms and he gathered her close, rocking her fragile body as if she were the most precious thing on earth.

I can't bear it, decided Samantha. I can't look on at a moment like this, even though she wants me to. I might even say she is enjoying my discomfort. . . .

But in that instant, the French girl threw her a glance of helpless appeal, and only the most inhuman would have failed to be moved by it. Samantha felt an upsurge of pity for her, realizing that those beautiful eyes had turned to her because she needed another woman's understanding and help in an alien world. Samantha felt not only ashamed, but eager to atone for her doubt. She would help Germaine de la Roche in any way she could. This was the kind of person anyone would wish to protect.

She was also, evidently, a girl who could be intimidated very easily. There was real apprehension in her eyes as she gazed at Samantha. "Who are you? Can I trust you?" After going through the horrors of a desperate escape and losing both parents, naturally she would be mistrustful of any stranger. Samantha saw the nervous clenching and unclenching of Germaine's tiny hands on Mark's shoulders, as if he were the only thing in the world she could safely hold on to.

Mark must have sensed something, for without releasing his hold on the girl, he turned to Samantha and said in a quiet voice, "Germaine is highly strung. Be gentle with her, won't you?"

As if she could be anything else with so fragile a creature as this!

Samantha nodded. "*Je suis votre amie, mademoiselle. Vraiment, I am your friend. Believe me, please.*"

"You see how well she speaks your language, my darling? Doesn't that help to make you feel at home?"

"Why she should speak it so well?" Germaine asked suspiciously.

"Because I lived mainly in your country until I was seventeen," Samantha said. "Yours is my second language, and one I enjoy using."

Mark hastened to assure her, "You are not surrounded by enemies here. This is not France, but England, and soon it will be your own country." He tucked another pillow under her head.

Samantha had the impression that his idea did not comfort the girl at all, for she murmured, "There can be spies everywhere. There is evil all around us. People will do anything for money—The most unexpected people in the most unexpected ways."

"You are safe, little one, believe me," Mark answered soothingly. "No one can harm you here." He looked at Samantha as he clutched Germaine to his chest, as if to say: "You see the state she is in . . . we must have patience."

Samantha nodded imperceptibly and, seeking an excuse to leave, she said, "I will see about clothes for mademoiselle to wear when she gets up. Mine will be too large, but perhaps I can clean and press those you traveled in, m'amselle?"

Germaine screwed up her pretty nose in distaste. "*Non!* I threw them to the floor for that grumpy old woman to remove. I hope she did not imagine I wish to see these again! And what did *cher* Mark say you were called?"

"Kimbolt. Samantha Kimbolt."

"Then, M'amselle Kim-bolt, none of those hideous garments, *je vous en prie*. I had to be disguised as a peasant woman. Imagine! A frayed shawl and a worn pelisse, and my hair matted and dirtied—" She shuddered, and her glance went to an open basket trunk nearby. Had Piper foraged inside for the nightwear her mistress-to-be now wore, the tiers of finest Brussels lace adorning sheer silk from Lyons? This émigré had been lucky indeed to escape with such a wardrobe. Samantha glimpsed silks and satins, and from beneath the top layer of lighter garments a sable-edged hood, part of a costly cloak. Over the back of a chair lay a lavish peignoir. It matched the fetching bedgown, beneath which the French girl's young breasts showed clearly, so close to Mark's hand that he had only to move his fingers to caress them—as only a short time ago they had caressed Samantha's.

Bastard, she thought again, more savagely this time. He was nothing but a lecherous, unscrupulous bastard who thought any woman was fair game! *By God, my fine master of Hawksmere*, she vowed, *I will prove you wrong!*

He had taken her by surprise, and her hot young blood had almost betrayed her, but at least she had surprised him in return by striking out at him. Now she made herself a solemn promise that never would he have the chance to seduce her, never use her, and then cast her aside like a whore.

She crossed briskly to the trunk. "I will unpack this now, and if any garments are creased, I will have them pressed."

"I fear most of them will be," Mark commented, turning to look at her. "They have lain in that trunk since I brought it to England as part of my own baggage. It was the only way to get some of Germaine's clothes here, and there were many from which she had no desire to be parted."

I can well believe that, thought Samantha as she dipped into the pile of costly clothes. And I suppose I should have expected such solicitude for her from you, Mark Chaters, besotted as you are. The thought was depressing, and she stooped low above the trunk, not only to hide her reaction, but to avoid the sight of Germaine snuggling up to Mark like a grateful little kitten.

"My darling," he laughed as she whispered something in his ear. Then he continued, "Samantha's room is next door, my love, so she will be close at hand should you want her. I will have a bell installed so you may summon her whenever

you wish, and this one—" he touched an embroidered bell-pull beside the bed, "this rings direct to the kitchens, so someone will always obey your call. You see, you need have no fear of ever being alone or abandoned, and soon you will be well enough to get up."

When I leave them alone, Samantha wondered, will he make love to her—real love, naked body to naked body between those sheets? And will he visit her in this room at night when I am in bed next door, not caring a damn that I shall hear every sound and find it torment? Quickly, she threw the garments across her arm and left the room before her thoughts could betray her. The couple was laughing together as she closed the door behind her.

Outside, she came face to face with Piper, who was scowling as usual. Samantha was beginning to share her brother's dislike of the woman. A timid housemaid stood behind her.

"Your room's ready, miss, and a right rush it's been to prepare it," Piper said, wiping her hands on her clean apron.

"Then what a pity it was neglected. To have kept it clean and aired regularly would have saved you a lot of time and effort now. I suggest that at least one room a day be thoroughly cleaned and put in order from now on. That way, we will restore the household to a semblance of what it used to be."

"And how do *you* know how it used to be, miss?"

"My father was born and brought up here," she retorted quickly. Without giving Piper a chance to reply, she turned her attention to the young housemaid. "Are you Alice or Sarah?" she asked pleasantly. "My brother told me about both of you. And about you, of course, Piper."

The woman's expression eloquently implied that she could well imagine what Master Richard had said of her. "This one's Sarah," she snapped.

"Let her speak for herself. And don't be shy of me, Sarah. Mrs. Piper has no doubt told you that until you have a new mistress in control of the household, I shall be in charge. I am sure we will all work well together, so don't be afraid of making an occasional mistake, Sarah. I won't eat you!" She smiled gently.

"Sarah and Alice take their orders from *me*, miss."

"Miss Samantha." The correction was pointed. Although she disliked formality and felt that titles were hypocritical, she could see that she would get nowhere with this woman by

being familiar. "And since all orders will come initially from me, I am sure you will pass them on to Alice and Sarah without harshness. Now, which of the girls uses a goose-iron best? Which one enjoys pressing clothes?"

"Enjoys it?" Martha echoed. "What does it matter if they do or they don't? They do the jobs they're given. That's what they're here for."

"They will do them better if they enjoy them. So, Sarah, do you fancy pressing, or shall I call on Alice?"

"Alice uses the goose-iron better'n me, ma'am," the girl answered nervously. "She uses it real good." Sarah stood in awe of Alice, who was never meant to be a servant below-stairs. What that mother of hers, who had a smart modiste's business in Hythe, was thinking of by putting her only daughter in service, goodness only knew. Everyone hinted that Victoria Turner was a strange woman with a past, and many were the rumors about her and the lovely daughter she took no interest in.

"I'm 'andier with scrubbin' and beeswaxin' and such-like," Sarah continued, but then she broke off, as if surprised by her own audacity. She threw a frightened glance at Piper, expecting a reprimand for opening her mouth.

Samantha said encouragingly, "So you actually know how to mix beeswax? It is quite an art, I know."

"Oh, yes ma'am! Me granny taught me."

"Then you are a clever girl and we are fortunate to have you at Hawksmere." Samantha was rewarded with a smile of beaming gratitude from the little maid. "Now take me to the laundry, Piper, and send Alice to me there."

"Alice'll be busy cleaning vegetables, miss . . . S'Mantha." The woman barely uttered the name, throwing it in as a concession.

"It is pronounced Samantha. You will become accustomed to it." Walking toward the rear corridor and leaving the woman to follow, Samantha added, "I presume this leads to the back stairs? I wish to inspect the kitchens."

Without answering, Martha Piper abruptly seized the bundle of clothes and headed for the back stairs. Ill humor was in her voice as she remarked, "I should've thought you'd want to go to your room and unpack." At Samantha's half glance over her shoulder, she added, "Miss Samantha" very much against her will.

"Has my valise been taken up?"

"By me? I don't cart bags upstairs."

Sarah said eagerly, "I'll carry it up for you, ma'am."

Piper rapped, "You've other jobs to do, my girl, so hurry ahead and get on with them. There's all that glass in the butler's pantry waiting to be washed. Seems it's going to be used again from now on."

The girl scurried ahead obediently.

"After I have inspected the kitchen quarters, you and I must have a talk," Samantha told the woman. "We must plan a workable domestic routine and the quicker we put it into operation the more your new master will like it."

If there was to be a battle between them, Samantha knew that the sooner she won the first round, the better. This small preliminary skirmish was therefore important.

They had reached the back stairs and Piper was about to thrust herself in front when Samantha's foot touched the top tread, forcing her to give way. The woman disliked that. Not since the death of Mr. Jonothan's wife had it been necessary for her to give precedence to another woman, and Samantha was well aware that the advent of a new mistress was unwelcome. It was bad enough having to bend the knee to some French foreigner, but even worse, to a poor relation of the late owners. Hawksmere Abbey didn't belong to the Kimbolts anymore. They were outsiders now, and Martha Piper was intent on showing it.

The kitchens were large and rambling, but mercifully warm. A great fire roared in a vast iron grate, flanked by immense bread ovens set deep into the stone walls. A blackened kettle hung on the fire crane, and beside it a heavy spit revolved. A small sheep was being roasted, and a set of copper pans simmered gently.

Martha saw the pans and snorted. She rounded on a black-haired girl standing in the shadows.

"You haven't set the veg to boil yet, surely to goodness, you stupid dolt? Does Mrs. Thomas know?"

"She left me to see to them when the time came," the girl answered in a well-spoken voice. "She'll be back soon, and if I have done the wrong thing, she can complain, not you."

Samantha was not surprised by Martha's rage, but she was certainly astonished at the girl's indifference. From beneath a heavy cloud of dark hair, a pair of green eyes glanced at the woman casually. "Well, at least you can't accuse me of forgetting all about them, Mrs. Piper, so don't fly up into the boughs."

Samantha was impressed at the assured way in which this

attractive girl spoke and held her head. Here was a young woman who would rise above her lowly circumstances because she was determined to, using whatever weapons she possessed. There was something about her—she had an air of refinement that was instinctive and not acquired. This refinement was reflected in her speech, and in addressing the housekeeper as "Mrs. Piper" instead of "ma'am" she placed herself on an equal footing. If Martha Piper didn't like it, it would make no difference to Alice. Her cool green eyes made that abundantly clear.

Piper dumped Germaine's clothes on the kitchen table, crossed to the fire and set aside the vegetable pans. Alice shrugged, picked up one of the gowns and held it aloft, admiration in her eyes. Her work-roughened fingers stroked the smooth silk, her rough skin grating on the material. She frowned at her hands in distaste.

"Put that dress down, Alice Turner!" Piper shrieked, as she turned around. "Who gave you permission to touch it?"

"I took it for granted that you had brought these clothes to me for pressing. They belong to the new master's betrothed, I'll be bound. Anyone can see they're the work of a French dressmaker." Unhurriedly, Alice put the gown back on the pile, and as she did so her cool eyes turned to Samantha, who was well aware that the young woman was carefully assessing her.

"This is Miss Kimbolt," the housekeeper announced. "She has joined the household."

"Master Richard's sister?"

There was interest in Alice's voice, also a hint of familiarity as she continued, "You don't look a bit like him, he so dark and you so fair. And in what way have you 'joined the household'?"

"In one of authority," Samantha replied.

Her tone came as near to deflating Alice as it was possible to deflate such composure.

"And that puts you in *your* place, my girl," Piper said tartly. Samantha had a feeling that the woman had tried many times to combat Alice Turner, without success, and enjoyed a vicarious triumph in Samantha's small victory with the maid.

Alice took a breath, then inclined her head. "Welcome to Hawksmere, Miss Kimbolt," she said. "Are you mademoiselle's personal maid?"

Piper snapped, "No, miss, she is not, and that'll be enough of your insolence. I can't think why you've been allowed to

stay here so long." She picked up a pitcher from beside the sink and placed it on a shelf above her.

"Can't you, Mrs. Piper?" the words were almost whispered, but they contained a world of significance.

Piper retorted, "The new master'll get rid of you, mark my words. You're too bold, miss. Pride goes before a fall, remember."

"One can always pick oneself up again, Mrs. Piper."

Samantha listened in astonishment. This was no ordinary serving maid. She decided to cut off the argument before it blossomed into something truly unpleasant. "I take it the laundry is off this passage?" She said, and walked across the stone-flagged floor to an open door. It led, as she expected, to scullery, still room, buttery, and a sadly neglected butler's pantry. She glimpsed shelves of begrimed glass and crystal, tarnished silver that should have been stored in baize, and a deep sink to which Sarah had already fled, her elbows now deep in soapy water. At least they would soon be eating off clean plates abovestairs, and drinking from clean glassware.

Beyond the butler's pantry was the laundry; a damp room with a large stone copper in one corner. Off it was a smaller room, in the center of which stood a heavy table padded with thick material, and covered with a none-too-clean cloth. A row of goose-irons of varying sizes stood upon a cold range, its fire unlit. A strange smell, which had increased in intensity as they walked along the passage, permeated the place.

"If this is where clothes are pressed," she remarked, "surely it would be better to use the kitchen table? The irons can be heated there, and this peculiar smell, whatever it is, won't get into m'amselle's gowns."

"The kitchen table's always in use!" Piper snapped.

Samantha sniffed curiously. The smell was unfamiliar, and seemed to be even stronger when she went back into the passage and continued to the end, which brought her face to face with a closed door set in a solid stone arch. Of course, she remembered Richard telling her of the time when Hawksmere had been a monastery. The kitchens were then housed in the west wing, which consisted otherwise of disused monks' cells.

She tried the door, and found it locked.

"There's nothing on the other side," Piper said quickly. "This door's been shut for many a year."

But Samantha was convinced that the smell came from beyond it. She had a vision of moldering passages and damp

cells, and knew Mark would want to inspect them. "Where is the key?" she asked, observing the iron lock rusted and empty.

"Lost," said Alice's voice behind them.

Startled, Samantha jerked around. She had been unaware of the girl's light steps following. Alice smiled serenely. "I quite agreed—these lovely gowns should be pressed in the kitchen, and I will start on them right away. It would be a backaching job for you, Mrs. Piper, and you know how standing tires you."

The housekeeper could make no protest to that, and the girl tripped lightly back to the kitchen quarters. She certainly knew how to get her own way, Samantha reflected, feeling a growing sympathy for her. Doing menial tasks was degrading to such a girl; handling beautiful clothes would be some compensation.

At the kitchen door Alice turned. "I'll make sure my hands do no damage, Miss Samantha. It isn't my fault they're rough. I'm trying to improve them by rubbing goats' milk in at night."

"My goats' milk!" Piper screeched. "And who gave you permission to help yourself to it?"

"No one. And I don't. I save a portion of my daily half-pint. I can do what I like with that, Mrs. Piper."

"Bold hussy," the woman muttered, shaking her head as she turned away. "It's in the blood, of course."

Samantha was tempted to ask what she meant, but guessed that this bit of confidential gossip was precisely what Piper wanted. It would establish a link between them. But once that sort of relationship was launched, Samantha surmised, there would quickly be no domestic distinction between them, and she would have lost whatever authority she had just gained.

Samantha left the kitchen quarters without an answer or a backward glance.

Her shabby valise was standing in the main hall, just where her brother had dropped it. Amongst the neglected splendor it looked like an impoverished relation, and how appropriate to her own situation that was, she thought wryly. Her glance wandered from the bag's threadbare covering to the magnificent tapestries on the walls—Gobelin, she judged, despite the ingrained dust. One immense one, depicting King Solomon's judgment in the case of the stolen child, occupied almost the whole of one wall, running lengthwise above the long refectory table.

She ran her fingers lightly over the wood and was startled to discover a pair of carved initials entwined within a heart. What bridegroom had done that at his wedding feast, she wondered, before carrying his bride up the massive staircase to the nuptial bed? The initials were scarcely decipherable now, but the date beneath was still sharply defined, "1626." Nearly two hundred years ago. Had this couple lived happily ever after, Samantha hoped, growing old together in this ancient house, watching their children grow up, sleeping side by side in the great four-poster that Germaine de la Roche now occupied and in which her lover would soon join her?

Samantha would have to look on at the nuptial celebrations and hide her tumultuous feelings when Mark Chaters took Germaine as his bride, though precisely what her feelings were she refused to consider. They seemed to be a jumble of excitement and resentment, expectancy and jealousy. Ridiculous, of course. She must pull herself together and simply do her job in this household, hard as it might seem to quell whatever it was inside her that wanted to rebel and run.

"Damn," said Samantha aloud, banging her fist on the table. "Damn, damn, *damn!*" A good hearty swear, she had learned from both her father and brother, did a power of good, though what in the world she had to swear about, she had no idea. She should count her blessings—Aunt Charlotte had always drummed that into her! "You are a very fortunate girl, Samantha Kimbolt, remember that. Not all young women are so fortunate as you, with free bed and board and a roof over your head." Which is precisely what she now had. Bow the knee Samantha Kimbolt, and forget your dreams. Grovel in thanks to your benefactor for allowing you to remain in the home of your ancestors!

She stooped to pick up the shabby valise, and a large, work-callused hand reached before her. She looked up in astonishment to see Mark standing beside her.

"That is too heavy for you." He hoisted it in one hand and started up the massive staircase.

Samantha was annoyed with herself for feeling embarrassed, but she was as sensitive about her meager possessions as Alice had been about her rough hands. Above all, she was conscious of the strength of this man's body, recalling the moment when it had almost forced her to succumb, but he gave no sign of embarrassment or any indication that he recalled those wild, sweet moments. His face was an inscrutable mask, and he picked up her valise as if he were executing

no more than the normal courtesy he would extend to any woman.

Samantha thanked him politely, and walked after him up the stairs. He waited for her and she drew alongside.

"This thing will have to be discarded along with your drab gown and cloak, Samantha."

"I refuse to part with this carpet bag," she said, surprised. "It is mine, to do with as I wish, I believe."

"You must have an affection for ancient things if you intend to retain such an object," he laughed.

"Oh yes. It belonged to my father and went wherever he went, which was practically all over Europe, hence its wear and tear. It reminds me of him, and therefore I am very fond of it. I will keep it," she added decidedly.

They had reached the top of the stairs. He stood still and looked at her, and at once her color heightened.

Taking her elbow, he led her to a windowseat. She was quite unaware that the aureole window above shone down on her cloud of shining blond hair, or that he had the greatest difficulty in turning his eyes away from it.

"Why so defensive?" he asked gently. "Did you think I was deriding you? . . . Because of your ancient valise? You would be surprised by the things I have kept all my life for sentimental reasons—an old map of the world that hung above my father's desk, models of ships we built together when I was a boy, and a trinket box of Tunbridge Ware that belonged to my mother. I used to think that one day I would give it to my bride as a wedding gift, but of course it is quite unworthy of Germaine."

Germaine again. Always Germaine. It was useless to pretend: Samantha had to admit to herself that she envied Germaine this man's love and her good fortune in marrying him, though no doubt the French girl was unaware of his propensity for pursuing other women. Perhaps, in true French tradition, she had been brought up to expect infidelities in a husband and to look the other way when he enjoyed them. Marriage was the important thing, the state to be achieved in the interests of security and motherhood. Samantha was well aware that she herself was at an age when most young women were not only wives, but mothers, and she was certainly older than Mark's bride-to-be—a fact that made her feel very much on the shelf!

How strange were the twists and turns of fate! But for a trick of chance, Samantha might have been the one about to

become mistress of Hawksmere and Germaine, a poor émigré, might have been getting the household in order. But she would not let herself dwell on that, nor upon the dreams she had once had of meeting a man, and falling in love, and marrying, and being as happy as her parents. There was not the remotest possibility of that happening here, any more than in Aunt Charlotte's household. So, she decided philosophically, she might as well make the best of a bad job, and do her work without complaining.

"Tell me then," said Mark, interrupting her reverie, "why did your aunt really send you to Hawksmere? I am curious." He laughed before she could respond to his question. "The fact that she was eager to part with you was evident in her letter, which suggested that you were either a useless fliberty-gibbet, or else an aging spinster who threatened to become a burden."

"And so I did." She shifted her position in the windowseat so as to be further from him. They were so close, she could see the sunlight glinting off his copper chest hair. "Any young unmarried woman who has to be provided with a dowry in order to catch a husband is a burden."

His eyes changed. His expression became softer as he looked across at her. "Not you, Samantha. You will need no dowry in order to wed, that I'll warrant."

"So my father used to say—or hope, perhaps." Swift in her father's defense, she added, "He did his best to provide for us, and the fact that he left us penniless is no reflection on him."

Mark's hand touched hers very gently, whereupon she pulled away, desperately trying to check the tears that the memory of her father's death never failed to bring.

"Please don't sympathize. Father always told us we were not to cry when the time came for him to go, but only to remember the good times, the happy times. The most important thing was that he arranged our escape to England, otherwise Dick and I would never have arrived here. We were fortunate, just like your Germaine, with friends arranging safe passage, and a home such as this to come to."

He leaned back against the shutter and gazed thoughtfully at the opposite wall. "I have brought refugees over whenever possible, and my crews do as well. I ask no questions, even though I fear some of my men do it for money."

"Which apparently makes Mademoiselle de la Roche suspi-

cious. 'Anyone will do anything for money' she said. I wonder what makes her think that way. . . ."

"You must be patient with her, Samantha. Try to understand her."

Samantha shook her head in frustration, but said nothing. How difficult she would find it, being patient with someone who still believed in the divine right of kings and the inequality of serfs! That much was clear from the way she had inspected Samantha's clothing. Germaine was a beautiful and pampered kitten, and in Mark's besotted state, he was going to ensure that she remain so. For an intelligent and experienced male, he seemed a poor judge of character, in Samantha's opinion. He evidently underestimated his fiancée, just as he underestimated his new housekeeper.

Thoroughly out of sorts with him, she rose, picked up her shabby valise and marched on to her room. Mark strode after her and wrenched the bag from her grasp.

"What now? You seem again put out with me. What has angered you?" he insisted, taking her arm and whirling her around. "Myself, I suppose," he added, answering his own question. "You expect me to apologize for those moments in the library. Very well. I do, but don't expect me to regret them. They told me a lot about you."

"And they told me *worlds* about *you*, sir," she said with a slight smile, withdrawing her arm delicately from his grasp.

She snatched the carpet bag from him and shut her bedroom door in his face.

Chapter 7



It didn't take Samantha long to shake out her few clothes and hang them in a vast closet, in which they looked even more dejected. Her spirits lifted, however, at the thought that tomorrow she was to replace them.

There was a tap on the door, and Dick's face appeared. He was glum and unsmiling. He closed the door very quietly behind him.

"Why so secretive?" Samantha asked, placing her hands on her hips. "And why so blue-deviled?"

"I want to talk to you," he said, walking to the bed and sitting down heavily at the foot. "It's all very well for you to sound so cheerful, Sam, but what about me?"

"What about you?"

"Well, look at the man! A tyrant and a bully. A fine time I am going to have, working for him!" He scuffed the heel of his boot on the carpet.

"That's up to you. On the whole, I think you should be grateful." She was surprised to hear herself rallying in Mark's defense, but fair-mindedness compelled her. She went and sat next to Dick, taking his hand. "He is offering you responsible work, good reward if you earn it, and the satisfaction of restoring the estate to what it must once have been."

"For *his* benefit."

"That is hardly surprising, since he now owns the place. And fond as you were of Uncle Jonothan, you must admit the poor old man let it run to seed."

"Hell's teeth, Sam. Are you sticking up for Chaters? After the way he declared he wouldn't have you, too! Treating us like poor relations, that's what he's doing."

She shrugged. "I've grown accustomed to being treated as such these past years. Necessity is a hard master."

"And Mark Chaters threatens to be an even harder one."

"That remains to be seen. What he offers me here is infinitely preferable to Aunt Charlotte's bounty."

"Dancing attendance on this French girl he is going to marry? Samantha, dear sister," he declared, taking her hand, "they are usurpers here."

"You didn't say that when you arrived at Wimpole Street. You said Mark was welcome to Hawksmere and that you wouldn't have the burden of it around your neck for anything."

"Well, it seems I am going to, all the same. If anything goes wrong, I will be blamed. If profits don't come romping in, that will be my fault too . . . and my pockets will be to let."

"A condition to which you are obviously unaccustomed," she teased, chucking him under the chin. "You are quite the dandy, aren't you?" she laughed. "Uncle Jonothan must have minted coins himself to keep you in such style. Oh, don't be so downhearted! Mark is not expecting wonders overnight. He promised to find a full-time shepherd, and new stock and everything a good farm needs. Revitalizing earth that has deteriorated takes time and patience."

"And money."

"Which he is prepared to pour into the place."

"There are quicker ways of making it," Dick muttered enigmatically.

"Such as? And what else are you qualified to do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, I admit."

"Nor I," she said gaily. "I can speak French and sew and . . . goodness, Dick, I don't have a great deal to recommend me, do I?"

"Sam!" he chided.

"So, we must both make the best of things," she interrupted. She glanced at the elaborate smoking jacket he had changed into. "Uncle Jonothan was obviously a dear old spendthrift, Dick, but on all the wrong things. If that

allowance you quoted to Mark was genuine, he had no greater sense of money values than you."

"Of course it was genuine. He never quibbled about a thing and never interfered."

"With what?"

"With me!" Richard got up and went to her closet to glance through her paltry belongings. "With anything I did, or where I went, or who I made friends with."

"In short," she pointed out in a practical tone, "he left you to your own devices, was overly generous, and spoiled you."

"That's not fair! And it's not like you." He turned to her, clearly upset. "Do you know how his wife died? It's what drove him to be such a negligent, sad old man at the end. Thomas told me Ruth Kimbolt fell to her death only a short distance from the house through a hole in the broken wall Uncle Jonothan had never bothered to mend. Can you imagine how he must have felt about the accident?"

Samantha was silent. Then she shook her head. "I'm truly sorry to hear that, but it doesn't change the fact that we have to take care of ourselves now. We never gave a thought to the future in the old days, but those days are long gone. Oh, it's not all bad." She came to him and took his hand. "Now, at last, my life has changed. I never thought it would." She threw a glance toward the gaping closet that housed her dreary garments. Somehow they seemed to personify her spirits at their lowest ebb.

"Can't you understand how I feel, Dick? Just to be allowed to buy *new* clothes, and the stylish ones, too, is the most exciting thing that has happened to me for a long time. Even though my good fortune is ordained by the royal command of Mark Chaters, that makes no difference to my pleasure."

"It hasn't occurred to you that strings may be attached? And never blush and purse up your lips at me, sister. You know full well what I mean."

Samantha shook a finger in Dick's face. "And I know full well how to deal with such a situation, should it arise—which, let me assure you, it will not."

"How can you be so confident?"

She answered hastily, trying to sound clever and sophisticated, "You will think me quite Gothic, brother, but a virgin such as I is above reproach." Even to her own ears, the tone sounded forced. "What is more," she hurried on, "I judge that Mark Chaters is experienced enough to have no interest in such a creature, so have no concern on my behalf."

"You look lush enough to have been bedded well and often."

"Ah, but looks are deceptive," she answered airily. "Now," she said, changing the subject, "tomorrow you are to drive me to Hythe to visit the modiste, though how much I shall be allowed to spend, I forgot to ask."

"Don't worry on that score. Chaters has already provided a note, giving carte blanche."

"Has he? Then perhaps he isn't so tyrannical after all."

"Tyrannical is not the word usually applied to a man who buys a lavish wardrobe for a woman."

She threw her arms about her brother's neck and laughed heartily. "No, Dick! I assure you. A man already so besotted with another woman has eyes for no one else. Wait until you see Mademoiselle de la Roche for yourself! Then you will understand that this bedecking of Samantha Kimbolt is solely to ensure that the enchanting Germaine shall not be depressed by a dowdy companion."

Richard dropped a brotherly kiss on her cheek, and withdrew her hands. "Until dinner, then. And what a meal *this* should be!" As he went out into the corridor, he came face to face with Alice, who slid silently out of the shadows and came to his side.

"Piper is having forty winks," she whispered enticingly, "which means she won't miss me. We have time for half-an-hour, Master Richard."

Regretfully, he put her aside. The unexpected arrival of Hawksmere's new owner had dampened his spirits, and consequently his ardor. Alice sensed it.

"What's wrong?" she went on, a concerned look on her pretty face. "Are you afraid your sister will open her door and find us here? She's unpacking, isn't she? Won't that keep her busy for a while? We have time to slip along to your room. Thank goodness, it is far enough away from Miss Samantha's for her to suspect nothing. But what if she does? You're your own master."

"Not any more," Richard said morosely. "Hawksmere has a new owner, and he is now my master. And yours, sweet Alice." He tucked a curl back under her cap. "A master with an eagle eye, what's more."

She answered pertly, "I don't mind if it settles on me. I had a good look at him shortly after he arrived. What a body! It must be magnificent, stripped."

That roused him, as she knew it would. "If you so much as let him touch you—"

"Then why don't *you*, instead?" she invited, seizing his hand and placing it on her breast while, with the other, she gently rubbed him between the thighs until she felt him respond. In five minutes they were in his room, the door locked, eager young bodies shedding their clothes in a pathway of abandon to bed. She was ripe and ready for him, moist and hot and impatient, greedy for his thrusting passion. As mouth fell upon mouth, flesh merged into flesh, rising and falling rhythmically. There was no preliminary love play, for none was needed.

"Dear God," she sobbed, as he held and caressed her. "I have waited for this all day! All day . . . *all day!*" And on the last delirious note her words trailed off and she cried out. So impatient was she that he almost missed reaching the peak with her. Then they collapsed, spent, exhausted, two healthy young animals who enjoyed each other fully and eagerly.

After a while Alice turned to him and said, "I can always make you want me, can't I, Master Richard? Not feeling so down in the mouth now, are you?"

He laughed and kissed her. "You siren." He brought his mouth down to her breast.

"If I am," she answered, "you have made me that way, because you have taught me everything. . . . But we needn't be in such a hurry tonight. We'll take longer, and do all the other things you have taught me."

He moved away, untangling his limbs from hers. "Sorry, Alice, but not tonight. I shall be busy."

He didn't have to say in what way. "Then I'll just have to wait again, won't I?" she answered philosophically, sighing. "But I hope you'll come back earlier than expected. I'll be here, Master Richard, waiting in your bed, as always."

It was Samantha who set out the fine Rockingham china for dinner that night. It had been stored away in cupboards for years, and the setting out of newly washed glass and polished silver had come as such a shock that the housekeeper could not even recollect how to go about the job. Samantha dispatched an eager and excited Sarah to fetch the silver cutlery she had been cleaning. There had been neither discipline nor dignity at Hawksmere for a long time, and this sudden overturning of custom took everyone by surprise.

"And Lor', Miss S'mantha, don't it look a treat?" Sarah

asked, holding up each piece to view. "And wait until y'see the sauce boats and tureens! I've polished 'em until y'can see your face in 'em!"

This bouncing, beaming, rosy-cheeked country girl found so much splendor fascinating, as she had never enjoyed it before.

By late afternoon, Alice had finished pressing mademoiselle's gowns and begged to be allowed to take them up herself, to which Samantha readily agreed. Not five minutes later, she herself was summoned to Germaine's room and instructed—not requested—to handle her clothes personally in the future. "I want no servant girl acting as my personal maid."

"But I am not your personal maid either, m'amselle."

"Then what are you, pray?"

The pouting lips softened the words with a smile, but Samantha was not deceived. This doll-like creature was a sly little enchantress who evidently was expert on getting her own way. "I am to be your companion, and deputize for you on the household side until you undertake those duties. Surely you remember Mark telling you so?"

Germaine yawned. "Impossible. Not for a long time will I be ready to undertake household responsibilities. And, *bien sûr*, you are more accustomed to domestic duties than I, so pray undertake them permanently. I must have a lady's maid as well."

Samantha stood her ground. "I suggest you speak to Mark about that," she said flatly. "And now I will leave you to dress for dinner—"

"I have never dressed myself in my life!"

"Not even during your arduous days of travel from France to England?"

Germaine shuddered. "Do not remind me of those days, I beg you! Not once did I have my clothes off . . . huddled in a hold fit only for animals, with a jug of cold water never changed to suffice for my toilet! I could scarce keep myself clean. Can you wonder I ordered all my clothes to be burned on arrival?" She shrugged. "As for my dinner, a tray can be brought to me, though I doubt if I could eat more than a particle of cold Swab—the breast, of course—and perhaps a few potatoes spiced in vinegar. My exhausted constitution could stand no more."

"I will prepare an invalid dish for you myself, m'amselle, if you feel so frail."

The French girl's glance darted in suspicion, but Samantha's face revealed nothing but sympathy. She was already becoming expert in hiding her feelings where Mark's pampered bride-to-be was concerned.

Samantha made an orgeat of almonds, flavored with orange-flower water, and sweetened with capillaire, and brought an accompanying glass of raspberry-vinegar water. Samantha then carried the tray upstairs herself, only to find, later, that Germaine had pushed the food away after only a few mouthfuls, and fallen asleep.

Dinner proved to be passable. The beef à la vinaigrette was reasonably succulent, considering the fact that Samantha had only just shown Mrs. Thomas how to prepare it that afternoon. The ragout of Cod-sounds that preceded the main course lacked only sufficient herbs to really enhance the flavor, but no one commented on that. The vegetables, however, due to Alice's bad timing, were disastrous. Fortunately, Mrs. Thomas had achieved some removes of reasonable success, and finally produced a ripe Stilton soaked in port wine to conclude the meal.

It was clear that serving dinner in the dining room was a revolutionary procedure. For too long Martha Piper had been accustomed to sending a tray to Uncle Jonothan in the library, and another to young Master Richard wherever he happened to be—in his room, or in the long hall, or in the morning room, or even in the kitchen if he happened to be there flirting with the maids. Considering this lack of practice, then, Samantha had to admit that the performance came off reasonably well, at least for opening night. In time, and with practice, things would improve.

Mark pushed himself back from the table when the meal was over and gave a deep sigh of appreciation. "My compliments to you, Samantha," he said gravely, "on achieving this first step in civilizing the household. I imagine this dining table has not looked so elegant since my mother's day."

"Indeed," Dick admitted, rubbing his belly, "I cannot ever recall having dined in such state. Dear sister, you are a miracle worker!" He stood up from the table, checking his pocket watch. "If you will both excuse me," he said hastily, "I mean I do love your company, Sam, but I have a pressing appointment."

She smiled and bid him farewell. She wondered, did some village wench await him in Appledore? Then Mark bowed

politely to Samantha and also went on his way. She had the impression that both were in a hurry. And so a solitary evening stretched ahead, after supervising the clearing of the dining table and the removal of victuals from sideboard and serving tables.

As the clock struck nine, Samantha went to the library in search of a book. The remnants of a fire glowed in the hearth, but the curtains were not drawn. Outside, the night was already dark, with no sign of a moon, and beyond the windows, trees stood still as sentinels, a darker mass against the blackness. She touched a taper to the glowing coals and, shielding the flame with her hands, she carried it across to the candelabra standing on Uncle Jonathan's ancient desk. As she did so, a shadow seemed to flicker across her line of vision, reflected in the window pane from outside. She looked more closely—was it just a trick of the light? No. There was another and yet another—silent figures moving hastily and furtively toward the boundary wall skirting the cliff edge high above the marsh.

At that very window Mark had stood this afternoon. All she had noted then was the roughness of the boundary wall, attaching no significance to it. Now, as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she seemed to detect a gap in it, a gap that stooping figures were widening, and one of them—dear God—one of them was Richard! She recognized his stance, the set of his shoulders, the movements of his head.

The taper flickered in her hand. She blew out the flame, aware that it might be seen from outside and knowing instinctively that to attract attention to herself would be unwise. Those silent, hurrying figures were up to no good—This much was obvious. Others now passed the window, bearing loads on their backs and all heading in the direction of the wall. There was something sinister about their furtive movements, as if they were accustomed to moving in swift and silent unison.

With a shock, she realized what they were about. She exclaimed aloud, "Dick, you fool! You stupid, headstrong fool. Have you no more brains than a codfish, lining yourself up with a smuggling gang?" For the sake of his own neck he must be stopped!

In a flash she was out of the room, racing up to her bedroom to fling on her cloak. She was determined to grab young Dick by the neck, if need be, and drag him away.

Whatever they were lowering over that broken wall, they would hang for it, if caught, and he amongst them.

She had had no time to explore the grounds of Hawksmere, but her sense of direction, coupled with urgency, took her along the corridors of the east wing and down the side staircase there—the quickest and easiest access to that part of the grounds. She recollected that cloisters ran from west to east and that it was at the eastern point that the smugglers were gathered. She also recollected having seen a summer house or gazebo located at the end of a lawn nearby. She had glimpsed it from an upstairs window and admired it; an elegant construction as sadly neglected as Hawksmere itself. She had made a mental note to turn her attention to it as soon as domestic demands within the abbey permitted.

Now it served only as a focal point for guidance once she emerged from the eastern entrance of the house. If she headed along the path skirting that lawn, she should emerge near the boundary wall, close to where the smugglers were lowering their secret cargoes down the cliffs to the marsh below.

But how to single out her brother? How to seize him and drag him away? To this she gave no consideration. Impelled only by the horror of her discovery and the danger he had placed himself in, she hurried through the darkness, the hood of her cloak hiding her brilliant hair. Even in so dark a night as this, it would betray her.

The path finished at the corner of the abbey. Beyond it was grass, silencing the footsteps of those swift-moving men. Where were they coming from, with their precious loads? From somewhere within the abbey, that was obvious. But that did not concern her now. All that mattered was concealing herself and, somehow, attracting Richard's attention, two seemingly impossible feats to achieve simultaneously. By pressing her cloaked figure against the stone walls she hoped she could hide from the line of hurrying men as they went by, their heads bent beneath their loads. How to reach Richard was another matter, but she would take care of that when the time came.

For what seemed like endless moments, she held her breath and watched. By day that wall would appear normal to the casual eye, the useful gap carefully filled in, but at night, the gap would be made sufficiently wide so that the smugglers could lower the packs into the darkness below. They roped them in a long chain down the cliff face into the secret, silent

world of the Romney Marsh from where, Samantha guessed, they would be moved by other waiting men to ships lying offshore.

Her heart thudding wildly, Samantha waited, aware that what she was seeing was smuggling in reverse: not bringing goods ashore illicitly, but dispatching them. In this part of the world that meant only one thing. Fleeces. Romney wool for lowland weavers, and gold for the men who got it to them.

Occasionally she heard the soft cry of an owl and, far below, there would be a brief flicker of light, hastily extinguished. These were not lights from fishing vessels, but regular beams focused straight up to the abbey, where no preventive officers could lurk.

Huddled in shadow, her cloak wrapped tightly about her and hood well down over her face, she debated what to do next. Were she to reveal herself, any member of that cut-throat gang would knife her, strangle her, silence her in any way that was quick and quiet and convenient. Their father had often warned them about the brutality and violence along this coast—although, evidently, her brother had not heeded any of these warnings. Now she understood the source of Dick's funds—why he was so well dressed, why he was reluctant to be drawn into the unexciting business of farming, and why he had been glad to remain at the abbey. Had he not told her that very morning that if the new owner of Hawk-smere proved to be stingy, he himself would look after her? He couldn't do that with pockets to let; nor could his pockets have been so well lined by Uncle Jonothan. The truth had been staring her in the face, had she had the wits to see it.

Vexed with herself, she thrust an errant strand of hair beneath her hood and in so doing dislodged the covering, revealing her tresses, as bright as full moonlight, streaming in the wind. She tried to cover them, but it was too late. A hand clamped down over her mouth and a muffled voice from behind hissed, "*Keep quiet, unless you want a bullet in your head!*"

The hand was hard and strong; so was the arm that seized her around her waist and lifted her bodily from the ground. She was carted away like a bundle and carried backward so she could catch no glimpse of her assailant. Had she wanted to cry out, she would not have been able to, for the man's hand covered her mouth entirely. He dragged her nerveless body across the lawn, moving swiftly toward the abandoned summer house and, without ceremony, he hurried her inside

and closed the door behind them with one thrust of a foot. Setting her down, but still keeping his hand over her mouth, her assailant reached behind him in the darkness. She heard a key grating in a lock. She was alone in this pitch black place with a desperate man. He could rape her, kill her, do what he willed with her, but one thing was certain—she would never get out of this place alive.

Fear spurred her brain into action. She bit the fingers crushing her mouth, but her teeth jarred on metal—a ring, broad and flat. She wanted to put up a hand to feel it, to try to memorize it in detail, in the wild hope that somehow she would escape and, one day, come face to face with her assailant and so identify him. But hundreds of men wore such rings, and when she lifted her hand the man seized it with his free one, propelling her across the room. She hit against assorted items of furniture—garden chairs of wrought iron, judging by the solidness of them, but finally she came up against something long and low, which proved to be a couch or a chaise longue she judged, as he thrust her down upon it. It was soft and cushioned, and when her body collapsed upon it, he came down on top of her.

Breathless, unable to move, she lay still. Fight, and it would be the end of her. Remain supine, and he might think her too terrified for resistance, and therefore no threat. "If you scream," came the muffled voice, thick and breathless, "they will hear you, and I will have to kill you before they do. They could break this door down with ease. Remember that, and keep silent."

His hand covered her mouth again, and his other pinioned both her wrists. His fingers were as strong as a vice, and she would not have had to touch his mouth to know that it was covered with a scarf, as were the faces of all the smugglers. These ruthless brigands took no chances, and certainly never risked recognition.

His body was heavy on her own. She was thankful for the deep cushions beneath her, and also grateful and surprised when he removed his hand from her mouth. He lifted her head and placed a cushion beneath it. She said nothing; no word of thanks, no question, nothing to betray the fear that would undoubtedly be revealed in her voice. Anything but docile by nature, Samantha knew that docility was now her surest weapon.

Her body grew warm beneath his and, sensing this, he released her cloak, pushing back the hood so that her mane of

lustrous light hair spread out around her head. She felt his fingers run through strands of it, lifting them and letting them fall. Then, half raising himself, he moved sideways and removed her cloak entirely. She was grateful for that, for the summer house, long shut, was airless. Once her cloak was discarded, he rolled back on top of her.

And so they lay, body against body. She could feel his breath upon her throat. Now she regretted her impulsive action of tossing away the insertion of thick lace in her bodice, for the stranger's face moved downward, his breath touching her breasts instead of her neck. In one wild, sweet moment she was back in Hawksmere's library, feeling Mark Chaters unfastening the bodice of her gown and cupping a naked breast in his hand. . . . Looking back, that incident had been a jest compared with the threat of this one. Arrogant Mark Chaters had been bent on seduction, but this marauder was bent on something much worse.

Fear lurched in her stomach. She could not control an involuntary shiver, nor the trembling of her limbs. Now the man's hands slid from her hair to her throat, then to her breast. Deliberately, he unlaced her bodice. He evidently was bent on taking her first with slow relish. But after, God only knew what things a hardened criminal would do to a woman, prolonging his deeds to extract the fullest sadistic enjoyment from them. She lay inert beneath him, trapped and helpless, faced with immediate death if she so much as screamed.

At this moment, she wanted nothing so much as to live. She guessed that this man's intention was to abuse her body, even to brutalize her, but despite this, every fiber of her being cried out to go on living. Whatever he did to her, she was determined to survive somehow. Please him, her prudent mind told her. Let him have his pleasure. Give him that, and he will let you live in the hope of having you again.

But to lose her virginity in this way was something she had never anticipated. She had dreamed of losing it in rapture, adoring the man who carried her into womanhood. Instead, she was in this pitch-black summer house, lying beneath some unknown stranger who personified evil and cruelty.

It was then she realized that he had removed the covering from his face. How else could she feel his breath upon her skin? So if she put up her hands she could trace his features and memorize them. But before she could reach his face his hands caught hers, forcing them away. He laughed quietly, alert for every trick she might try.

She pretended to relax, to indicate that she was defeated, but it made no difference to him; he remained on top of her, giving her no chance to escape. She could not say she was uncomfortable, even so, for the softness of the cushioned sofa and the pillow he had provided for her head allowed her to tolerate his weight without difficulty. As he moved the upper part of his body, removing his jacket and tossing it aside, then quickly undoing the buttons of his shirt, she felt the muscles of his powerful chest move against her. Grudgingly, she admitted that he must be a fine specimen of a man. His thighs were strong against her own, and then his bared chest lay upon her bare breasts, naked skin against naked skin.

In one movement, his fine shirt was gone. It had felt like silk beneath her hands, and she remembered her father saying that smugglers were often rich, able to afford the luxuries of life. But now the touch of his skin was even more pleasurable. Never had she known what reactions of her body might betray her in such a situation. Her blood stirred in a wholly unexpected way as he unbuttoned the rest of her gown and dragged it off her. She began to protest, but her anxiety and embarrassment faded as she realized she was glad to be rid of the garment. The blackness of night covered her and concealed the flush of her cheeks. The summer house was becoming hotter, she thought—or was it the interchange of heat between their bodies?

She made no resistance as he slowly stripped her. He did it skillfully, peeling off her undergarments one by one but never giving her the chance to slide away from him. He hemmed her in by lying beside her on the outer edge of the chaise longue. With a minimum of effort and no clumsiness whatsoever, he completed his task of undressing her, stroking her flesh as he did so, pressing his lips against her breasts, but not yet kissing her on the mouth. Vaguely, she wondered why. All her thoughts were becoming vague now; vague and slightly delirious, amazement running through her mind because she did not find his touch loathsome, as she had anticipated, but increasingly delightful. Not knowing his face, his identity, his background or anything about him allowed her to transform the man on top of her into the ideal lover.

Then his mouth moved from breasts to belly, his tongue licking gently, probing the tiny valley of her navel and sending a leaping spasm of enjoyment through her, a flame of ecstasy that increased as she felt his fingers caressing the place that no man had ever before touched. Hesitantly, not daring

to think about what she was doing, she ran her hands over his body, quivering with pleasure.

Now her hands reached his thighs, and she marveled at the wonder of the male anatomy, thrilling at its power and strength.

Delirium seized her now. Mind and body were floating in the darkness, and deep within her flesh surged wave upon wave of heat and longing, each one stronger than before. As his fingers delved into the warm, sweet, intimate part of her, she could not deny that he was creating this wonderful sensation within her. She felt the throbbing symbol of his manhood hard against her leg, and she gasped with delight, instinctively opening her legs wider. She wanted more, much more, and at once he was astride her, stopping to kiss her breasts, teasing the nipples with his eager tongue, round and round, fiercely and then gently. Soon her breasts were full and flushed, pulsating with desire, and the current of elation inside her spread in ever increasing ripples, craving satisfaction.

He took her body then, entering slowly, but drawing back at once when he felt the barrier of her maidenhead. He gasped with pleasure and she heard him whisper in amazement, "Then I am privileged to be the first!"

She pressed herself forward, urging him to hurry. At that precise moment, a stab of pain ran through her, a sharp pain mixed with unutterable, intoxicating sweetness. She knew that if he pressed even further inside her, only the sweetness would remain. She implored him not to stop. "Please, please! Don't leave me! Go on, go on!" Her body was in control now, and her mind could have done nothing to halt the abandon she sensed coursing madly through her.

And so, very gently, he did, until the piercing of her maidenhead was over and a mounting delirium and delight gathered between them, compounded of surging heat, rhythmic thrusting, rising and falling, rocking together in total wonder, mouth against mouth, body joined to body, desire leaping to meet desire and the hot flame of their joy in each other growing more intense until it burst in a blinding explosion of delight. Samantha had never experienced anything so wonderful, so beautiful. Her body felt sanctified by the joy of it, uplifted and purified.

They lay for a long time, silent and spent. For a while she slept, then stirred again beneath the touch of his hands. He was stroking her with all the tenderness she had ever imag-

ined a lover would bestow. But he did not speak. She wanted to ask his name, but dared not. She did not want to know. The recollection that he was a criminal was too painful to encourage confidences, or to ask for them. It was better this way, for she would never meet this man again. She would remember him only as her secret lover—a fine, masculine body worshiping her feminine one—for that was what he had done, and what he was doing again as his hands roved over her.

They began their delicious love play once more, kindling her desire so that she turned to him instinctively, sliding a leg over his hip and drawing him to her. Their bodies met again and he was ready to take her once more, eager to savor their delight again and ensure it with every passionate touch. This time he entered her with ease. She arched to meet him in delirious abandon, marveling that such wonderful madness could take over again so soon and so passionately.

Chapter 8



She awakened to the sound of birds, and to sunlight streaming through windows of the summer house. For a moment she lay still, her bemused senses trying to comprehend where she was. Then memory returned with delicious impact and she turned to seek her lover once again.

He was gone. He had covered her naked body with her cloak and had picked up her scattered clothes, placing them in a neat pile on a marble-topped table nearby. Of himself, there was no trace. Only her body, changed by him from girlhood into womanhood, bore testimony that he had ever existed, and in every vein of her that awareness was vibrant and alive.

She sat up slowly, looking around. The room was small and sadly neglected, but the mosaic floor, when washed, would once again yield up its delicious colors, and the wrought iron garden chairs, painted white, needed only to be retouched to look as fresh and pretty as they had ever been. Some expert craftsman had designed them, also the marble-topped table on its wrought iron base. To her surprise, the stone walls were hung with hand-embroidered tapestries, and the mosaic floor bore scattered hand-woven rugs. The largest piece of furni-

ture in the room was the Louis Quinze chaise longue on which she had spent her night of love. It was gilt-framed and upholstered in rose velvet, thickly cushioned. She could not have asked for a lovelier bridal chamber.

Then she saw the key on the floor. Her lover had departed, locked the door behind him, then slid the key beneath. He had evidently wished to ensure that she would not be disturbed, nor be discovered lying there unclothed. Could a ruthless marshland smuggler be capable of such thoughtfulness? Immediately, she recalled that her brother was also a marshland smuggler—but for that fact she would not be lying here, unwilling to leave the couch on which she had been initiated into the delights of love.

She could not lie here dreaming of the night that had passed. She had to dress and slip back into the house. Should she meet anyone, she would casually announce that she had been out for an early morning walk. The excuse was feasible, for the day was bright and sunny, the morning birdsong sufficient to entice anyone outdoors.

She felt wonderful as she stepped across the lawn, through the eastern entrance to the abbey, and up the side stairs. Never had she felt so alive and happy, never so light of heart. Someday, somewhere, somehow, she would find her lover again; and when they met, surely she would know him instinctively. As for him, well, he would know her by the cascade of bright flaxen hair that had betrayed her by slipping from beneath her hood. He would recognize her by that alone. His caressing hands had fondled it time and time again, possessing it and loving it as he had possessed and loved her body.

She met no one on the way back to her room, and caught sight of only one figure—that of Alice, fully dressed, slipping quietly out of Richard's room. The knowledge of what this must mean pulled Samantha up with a jerk. How long had the girl been with her brother, and at what hour had he returned from his nocturnal activities? She was hardly in a position to criticize his bedding of the housemaid now, but she surely *would* have to question him about being mixed up with the local smugglers. She decided to tackle the subject when he drove her into Hythe to order her new clothes.

Samantha spent the next hours hustling the household staff into action. She supervised a tempting tray to be sent to Germaine's room, and ordered a fine meal for Mark in the breakfast room. He called her from the library where she had

been polishing the furniture, while Alice, somewhat heavy-eyed but not unwilling, washed the library windows and Sarah beeswaxed the fine refectory furniture in the great hall. Bit by bit, Hawksmere was coming into its own again.

"Good morning, Samantha," Mark said, nodding briskly as she entered and setting his cup of tea aside. "This was an extraordinary meal. You have Mrs. Thomas well in hand."

"Thank you. We seem to be getting along."

"Good. I trust you slept well? Your room is satisfactory?" he asked, rising and taking a few broad strides to the window. "Often one's first night in a new bed is troubling."

"I had an excellent night," she smiled, amused at the multiple meanings of her words.

"Fine," he commented brusquely. "Tell your brother, when he bothers to come down, that I have gone to Folkestone. I must get to the boatyard in record time this morning if I want to deal with things there and get back to Hawksmere in time to meet Dr. Devereaux from Rye. I have summoned him to visit my fiancée, who still seems to be suffering from the effects of her harsh journey."

To that, Samantha said nothing. Let the kitten sleep, she wanted to advise. "Until this evening, then," she nodded.

"I look forward to that. By God, at last I shall recover my appetite in this household!"

Appetite. Was that all he cared about? Didn't he know there were other, more important things in life than fine meals and boats and petulant fiancées who couldn't drag themselves out of bed? But by the time Richard came straggling downstairs, dressed to the hilt in cream-colored pantaloons and a navy cutaway jacket, she had forgotten all about her conversation with Mark.

Even as Richard handed her into the coach and they started on the road to Hythe, she had very little on her mind other than the events of the previous night. It had been real, that she could not deny, and yet now it seemed so like a dream.

"Why so quiet, Sam?" Dick teased after chatting on about the poor quality of Hawksmere's livestock and the surly attitude of Jake Dempster, the shepherd.

"Am I quiet?" She smiled and reached over to pat his hand. "Just thinking of all the lovely new clothes I shall have. And about time, too!" She could not bring up the matter of smuggling just yet—she did not want to spoil the mood.

Shortly, the coach drew up before the shop of Hythe's modiste, and Dick climbed out to help Samantha down. "No

longer the little brown wren, eh? Not after today," he chided. "Let's see what Mrs. Turner can concoct to enhance your already superlative beauty."

"You, my little brother, will eat your words when you see my transformation," Samantha joked, shaking her fist at him in mock rage. In the aftermath of last night's wonder, which lingered in her heart and in her blood, she felt unwilling to allow the intrusion of any discord or dispute.

The door flew open at their knock, and a woman stood before them. Samantha could not take her eyes off the dressmaker's jet black hair, pale skin, and emerald green eyes. She could have been Alice Turner's older sister.

"Good-day," said Dick cheerily. "I wish to present my sister, Miss Samantha Kimbolt. And this, you will find, Mrs. Turner, is a letter from the new master of Hawksmere, Mr. Mark Chaters. It will tell you all."

On the presentation of Mark's letter, the seamstress's eyes opened wide in expectation of a large order.

Samantha looked around. In the bottle-glass windows facing the cobbled street were displayed bonnets and gloves and laces—French gloves and French laces—which, like all similar luxuries these days, must have been smuggled across the Channel. Yet, how could the Commissioners of Customs and Excise prove that they had been obtained illegally? All the owner of this establishment had to do was claim that they had been bought from the wardrobe of an impoverished gentlewoman, for everyone knew that goods of such quality lasted forever and could be utilized over and over again. And in the event of suspicion, what preventive officer would be adverse to receiving a present for his wife?

There were Continental materials of all kinds, neatly stacked on shelves—Guipere and Brussels lace, satins from Paris, silks from Lyons. This small and exclusive establishment was a veritable treasure house, but Samantha guessed that it displayed only a very modest assortment of its wares.

"Ah, Mr. Kimbolt," gushed the seamstress. "This is an unexpected pleasure—and to meet your sister, too. Allow me to welcome you, Miss Kimbolt. I am Victoria Turner—well, of course you know that! I had heard of your arrival, of course."

"I see. Your daughter must have told you I had come to Hawksmere," Samantha replied, moving inside the shop.

"Who else? And you wonder, do you not, why I allow her

to be in domestic service when I have an establishment like this and a skilled trade to teach her?" She shrugged and indicated the two chairs on either side of the large central window. Samantha and Dick took seats.

"The truth, alas," Mrs. Turner said sorrowfully, "is that Alice has neither a talent nor a taste for dressmaking. This had been a great disappointment to me. I had such hopes and dreams for the two of us. I was left in very straitened circumstances—but then, you are not here to listen to my troubles." The woman dismissed her cares with a wave of her hand. "I see from Mr. Chater's letter here that I am to equip you with a complete new wardrobe. I am deeply honored, and grateful in these increasingly difficult times."

Samantha glanced around at the shelves. Despite the woman's protests, she seemed to have enough money to keep a good stock of fabrics, and very fine ones.

Samantha's glance at the laden shelves did not pass unnoticed.

"All my profits, such as they are, have to go into the business, Miss Kimbolt. There can be no success without wise investment, therefore it is essential for me to lay in the finest materials I can obtain. When my business is firmly established and I can afford better accommodations for my daughter than my humble room above this shop, we will be together again. Meanwhile, she has her own room at the abbey, and a good position. But enough of my problems. It will be a pleasure to plan a wardrobe for a figure such as yours. May I invite you into my modest salon, where I can show you some designs?"

The salon was nothing more than a workroom, but somehow it achieved an air of elegance on a par with Mrs. Turner herself. Everything was orderly. A row of dressmaker's dummies, ranging from stout to slender, stood along one wall; there was a long table in the center, on which was spread a length of material with a pattern of tailor's muslin pinned to it; a tall cheval mirror dominated a curtained alcove and a gilt table displayed a number of French fashion plates.

"Alas," said Victoria Turner, holding a chair for Samantha, "it is difficult to obtain new issues. This terrible revolution put a stop to their publication, but some valiant French designers are still managing to produce them secretly. I am lucky enough to obtain them from time to time. I can adapt any designs to suit your choice and, if you will permit me, offer suggestions and advice." She glanced disparagingly at

Samantha's drab gray merino gown. No doubt Victoria Turner was accustomed to receiving the well-dressed matrons of the county instead of impoverished young gentlewomen.

"I should welcome suggestions, madame, after I have chosen materials," Samantha said tactfully.

The woman nodded approval. "Wise, Miss Kimbolt. Very wise. Style must always depend upon the cloth."

Her pleasure seemed genuine, but Samantha felt that she was seeing only the woman's professional face, the facade she presented to customers—a guise that might lapse in the privacy of her cramped quarters above the salon. However, the air of gentility was convincing. Samantha recalled that Alice possessed it too, and felt even more sorry for the girl condemned to domestic service in the isolated abbey. She must truly hate her menial position and perhaps even her mother for sending her there. She remembered the underlying defiance in Alice's voice and thought she now understood the reason for it.

Dick took his leave while Mrs. Turner and Samantha spent the next hour poring over fabrics and designs. Halfway through, the seamstress brought in tea, elegantly served in cups that Samantha recognized as Coalport, a very fine brand of English porcelain. This china was yet another proof that Victoria Turner had come down in the world. Samantha felt sorry for her, because in this day and age life was hard on women in her circumstances. But it had been harder on Alice. A room of her own she might have, but domestic work at Hawksmere would never put her in touch with the level of society that came to her mother's door. She might end up marrying a stable lad because no better chance came her way. The fact that she was enjoying a secret affair with handsome Richard Kimbolt was, alas, no guarantee of future security, and well did his sister know it.

Once designs and materials were decided upon, Samantha chose a few ready-made gowns for immediate wear; a morning dress of green mousseline with a Marie Antoinette fichu at the shoulders, a tea gown of sapphire blue with small hip panniers to emphasize her slender waist, and a dinner gown baring her shoulders, in a becoming shade of golden amber, like a deeper reflection of her own glistening hair. After that, there were shoes—mainly Louis-heeled and large-buckled—and the latest slippers of morocco leather or satin; gloves of velvet and satin and soft French kid; straw bonnets, Gainsborough-style hats with sweeping ostrich feathers, bandeaux

and fillets made of materials to match the gowns, and aigrettes of feathers to thrust into them. Spontaneously, she pirouetted before the mirror in her new finery, and Mrs. Turner exclaimed, "Enchanting, Miss Kimbolt! A real transformation, if I may say so."

Samantha didn't mind in the least her saying so, for it confirmed her own opinion. A transformation indeed. It was with regret that she again slipped on her gray gown for the trip home.

Samantha picked up the handboxes and descended the short flight of stone steps leading down to the cobbled street, accompanied by Mrs. Turner's assurances that her esteemed orders would immediately be put in hand. The first fittings would take place as quickly as possible—say, a week from today, at Hawksmere? Samantha said that would be excellent, if convenient for the modiste.

"Your convenience will be *my* convenience, Miss Kimbolt."

On this note of affability they parted, and Samantha hurried to the carriage. Richard was standing beside the horses, his back to her, but the man to whom he was talking faced Samantha squarely. His face was interesting—rather heavy, with a brutal touch about it, though decidedly handsome for all that. He eyed her boldly as she approached, only half-listening to Richard and giving the distinct impression that whatever the young man was saying, was of little interest to him. She knew instinctively that this man was eyeing her figure with blatant admiration, and that he was not the sort to conceal his physical interest in a woman. Although this embarrassed her, she found it somewhat flattering.

As she drew nearer to the coach she even sensed a proprietorial air about his glance. And when he lifted his hand to touch his chin, she saw a heavy ring on the middle finger. Shocked, she halted. This couldn't be—it *couldn't*! It was merely coincidence that her seducer's ring had been broad and solid, as this man's was.

The thought took hold of her and turned her limbs to water. Could this, in fact, have been her secret love? The man with whom she had experienced such ecstasy? She remembered the strength of her midnight paramour, his splendid thighs and hips, his muscled shoulders, his deep chest, and even one glance at the man talking to her brother revealed that he shared all these attributes. He also had the ruthless air of the men in these parts—men accustomed to battling with

nature and the law. Then she recalled her lover's merciless seizure in the dark, his threat to put a bullet through her head, his determination and strength as he carried her across the lawn to the summer house, flinging her down upon the soft cushions and then himself, on top of her. . . .

She refused to believe it, but there was mockery in this man's face as she forced herself to move on. Closer proximity revealed a lascivious mouth and equally lascivious eyes that held a touch of mystery in them, as well as a sense of enjoyment. There had been relish in her lover's approach last night, but not lasciviousness—unless her bemused senses had blinded her to reality as effectively as the darkness had. She remembered then how Mark had kissed her in the library—his embrace had been hard and demanding, with a touch of savagery. Her midnight lover's kisses had been totally different—as this brash, handsome man's would be.

Everything about Richard's companion proclaimed that he was a womanizer, and proud of it. He was a man who took his pleasure with the arrogant assumption that it was his male right to enjoy any available woman. Had this, in fact, been the attitude of her lover? Indeed, why should it have been otherwise for a man of experience? Only her own romantic longings would have made passion and fantasy flower into love. But darkness and expert love play could combine to bemuse an inexperienced young woman's senses until her blood leaped in response, and all her romantic ideals climaxed in delight, convincing her that her lover might feel as she did.

Richard turned, and saw her. She sensed his reluctance to present the man, but he had no choice. "Allow me to present Jake Dempster—" The introduction was hurried; plainly, Richard was anxious to get it over. Equally plain was Dempster's determination to linger.

"I recognize Miss Kimbolt, of course."

Dear God, what did that mean? She looked at his compelling features and her heart gave a terrible lurch. Shock rendered her speechless.

"Ye look surprised, Miss Kimbolt. But naturally, working at Hawksmere as I do, I saw ye on arrival. Ye didn't notice me, of course. Why should ye? I was working in the fields nearby when ye drove up to the abbey with your brother."

Dempster—the shepherd, of course. As she gazed at him, she marveled that a shepherd should be so well dressed, and so self-confident. There was a touch of familiarity in his

manner toward her brother. Plainly, he considered himself to be the equal of any man, and beneath his bold appraisal of her own body lingered the same implication. There was only one reason for that—Richard had made the mistake of aligning himself with the smuggling fraternity, of whom, without a doubt, this man would be a member. How else could he have obtained the money for those clothes and for that flashy gold ring?

She turned her back on him abruptly, dismissal in every line of her, although she wished to look on him again for some clue, some inkling as to whether her suspicions could be justified. At this, the man laughed softly and said in a rough voice, "Miss Kimbolt appears to have taken a dislike to me, Master Richard. She is anxious to be gone."

"Indeed not," she said hastily, uncomfortable at his bluntness.

Dick glowered at him, took Samantha's bandboxes, and helped her into the carriage. As he piled them on the seat beside her, Dempster doffed his tricornered hat, revealing wellpowdered hair tied at the nape of his neck with an elegant bow. Surely her seducer's hair had not been powdered? But of course he would attire himself differently at night for smuggling activities. Powdered hair was only worn by day, or for social events. But since last night he had had plenty of time to take his toilet in hand and cut a very presentable figure on the streets of Hythe. The thought did nothing to quell the apprehension in her heart.

If this bold-eyed man had actually been her seducer, he did not seem the type to keep a secret for long. And how excruciating to be always under the threat of his revealing their tryst—or worse—using the experience for his own purposes. On the other hand, the man was definitely attractive. Although a shepherd and below her in station, he seemed above pettiness or blackmail.

As Richard gathered up the reins, Dempster called up to him, "Remember this, young Master Kimbolt. I am answerable only to the new owner of Hawksmere, not to ye, even though ye may be in charge of things on the farm. So if he wants to end my employment, it is up to him to tell me. Pass that message on to him, young sir. Good day to ye, Miss Kimbolt. It has been a pleasure to meet ye," he added with a low bow, "and a great sight ye are for any man's eyes. I swear that hair would shine like the midday sun even in darkness, and never be forgotten."

Richard saw his sister's heightened color and took it to be a sign of her anger.

"You did best to ignore Dempster," he said reassuringly as they drove away. "And don't let the man upset you, Sam. He's too self-confident by far, especially where women are concerned."

"That much I could tell. And how does a lowly shepherd come to think so highly of himself? Success with women, I suppose."

"He enjoys that, yes." Although Richard was not overly fond of Dempster, he would not say much against him. Obviously, were it not for the shepherd, his pockets would never have become so well lined.

"Success with women would not wholly account for Dempster's arrogance," Samantha remarked thoughtfully, looking straight ahead as they drove toward Romney. "A shepherd's pay never bought those clothes . . . and Uncle Jonothan's allowance never bought yours." This was as good a time as any, she felt, to bring up the matter.

Startled, the reins jerked in her brother's hands.

"Careful," she warned, "you'll have us in a ditch if you drive like that." Her voice was cool, her manner composed. She was the elder sister dealing with a recalcitrant young brother, and little did he know how thankful she was to have something to which to turn her mind, other than Dempster.

She said briskly, "I have a crow to pick with you, brother. How old were you when you lined yourself up with the smugglers?"

"How the devil—"

"Did I find out? I saw you. Last night."

"Good God! You weren't *there*, were you?" His concern seemed more for her than for himself. "If you were, Sam, you must get away at once."

"It seems to me that you are the one who should get away," she pointed out, taking his arm as the carriage lurched from one side of the road to the other.

"I have nothing to fear. I am accepted, I belong to them. I am safe so long as I never betray them, and I would never be such a fool as to do that." Dick shook his head and looked at her with concern in his dark eyes. "But you, that's different. If anyone so much as suspected that you had been spying, your life wouldn't be spared. Since you are still alive, I take it you were unnoticed, so thank God for that. All the same, the less you know the better. One slip of your tongue, one

accidental hint that you saw something, and you would have to be removed. You must go. I'll give you money to tide you over."

"If I go," she said, putting a hand over his on the reins, "you go, because I positively refuse to leave without you. And don't try to frighten me."

"I will if I can." He turned toward her on the seat with a look of anxious intensity on his face.

"I asked you how long you've been mixed up in this business."

He shrugged. "Since I was fifteen, if you must know."

"And Uncle Jonathan didn't suspect?"

"Lord, no! He was never aware of what I was up to. So long as I left him alone to his scribbling and his drinking, he was happy to let me go my own way. Samantha, forget that for now. Only tell me, *did* anyone see you? The lookouts have sharp eyes, even in darkness, and as Dempster said, that hair of yours—"

"No one saw me," she answered vehemently, as much to quell her own alarm as his. "I went to the library in search of a book and noticed figures moving around outside. Even in the darkness I recognized you."

"Thank Gemini you didn't venture outdoors! The Owlers wish no one to observe them at their work." He gave the horses a slap with the reins to hurry them along.

"The Owlers?"

"That's what we call ourselves, after the Owlers of Romney Marsh who were around as long ago as 1276. They worked at night, communicating with owl noises. They shipped wool out of England to weavers in Flanders, from the shores of Kent and Sussex. They smuggled it illegally to avoid the excessive export duty, which, like everything else, increased with the years."

"It's terrible, Sam," he added, punching his thigh for emphasis, "up to six pounds on a poor bag of wool that fetched only one shilling and sixpence a pound! Unheard of! Eventually the government enticed Flemish weavers to settle in Kent, and then the craft flourished. Up until, oh I'd say about 1707—that was the year of the union with Scotland, which killed the weaving industry in these parts, and sent the Flemish home. So now, of course, they still want wool from us. You recall what Mark said about the business, the first time we met him? He knows the history of smuggling in these parts, that's obvious."

"And does he know that it's going on right under his nose at Hawksmere? Well, does he?" she insisted, bracing herself as the carriage jolted over the rough streets.

"I hope not," Richard answered, rolling his eyes to the sky, "or I judge it will be the end of a profitable business before I have reached the point for which I aim." The zest in her brother's eyes was reminiscent of the buccaneering light Samantha had sometimes seen in her father's. "And the danger adds spice to it, Sam. You have no idea of the excitement, or the rewards!" he went on, hurriedly, leading the carriage carefully over a large puddle. "Of course, I intend to give it all up when the time comes."

"And when will that be?" she asked sarcastically.

"When I have saved up enough to ship out of the country, my pockets lined with gold."

"And what will you do with it?" She shook her head and glanced down at the beginning of the marsh. They had passed through the ancient town of Romney and were heading toward Dymchurch-Below-The-Wall.

"I'll set myself up as an agent across the water."

"An agent? You mean a *spy*?" she breathed.

"Hell's teeth, no! Listen, Samantha. This smuggling business is highly organized; gangs can number in the hundreds. With a fast sloop or yawl, the voyage to Flanders or Holland can be accomplished between darkness and dawn, and even with all this, a man will know only the identities of those working nearest to him."

"Like Jake Dempster?" The name had a hollow ring in her ears.

Dick nodded. "Among others—people from the villages employed as casual labor, women as well as men, when the stuff comes ashore to be unloaded. The Owlery are separate and apart, of course, intent solely on their own operations, but no one is above giving a hand with import smuggling, too. The ships drop anchor offshore both to take wool out and to bring goods in. Fishermen row out to them and villagers wait on the beaches to unload the goods and pile them onto wagons and carts and horses." His voice became more animated as he described the scene. "Being neither sailor nor fisherman myself, I am a land smuggler. My job is to help get the contraband from the hides."

"Which, I take it, are somewhere in the abbey."

"Don't try to find them, Sam" Dick warned her. "Keep out

of things, please, my dear." He whirled around in his seat and grasped her left hand, squeezing it hard. "You are too independent and headstrong for your own good. But you know, if they were to find you out, I could do nothing to prevent them hurting you—even cutting your throat!" He shuddered as he choked out the words.

"I warned you not to try to frighten me," she said coolly. "But Dick, tell me about that gap in the wall. I didn't even suspect it was there. Did Uncle Jonothan know?"

"The poor devil couldn't fail to, in view of the disaster it brought into his life."

"What are you saying?"

"Do you remember, I told you the story of how his wife died?" Richard's face momentarily shadowed. "Our uncle was emotionally distressed for many years. Though he knew of the gap in the wall, he never bothered to have it repaired. And the Owlars simply made good use of it."

"Who gives you your orders?" Samantha asked, shaking off the memory of her tragic uncle.

"No one knows. Orders come in a roundabout way, never direct. There is only one thing about a leader that everyone can be sure of—he'll be rich, and most likely prominent in the county, protected by an eminently respectable profession or business. He could be a magistrate, a lawyer, a merchant, or titled nobleman. He could be anything!" Dick laughed. "And he'll have his agents in Zeebrugge and Calais or the Channel Islands, men who make vast profits and who own warehouses stacked with contraband. They ship it aboard our vessels when they drop anchor over there. And this is what I was telling you, Sam. I shall become one as soon as I have sufficient gold to set myself up. The only problem," he finished reflectively, "is that I fear the confines of such a sequestered life might prove somewhat repressive to a man of my temperament."

Samantha gave a despairing sigh, scarcely able to believe her ears. "You must have windmills in your head!" she told her brother scornfully. "And as for me, I have been blind. The truth has been staring me in the face since you walked into Aunt Charlotte's house. Your clothes, your self-confidence, your well-lined pockets, *and* your desire not to leave Hawksmere. Oh, Dick, you're a fool!" She shook his shoulder lightly.

He laughed. "Well, in a way, I'm glad you know. I don't

have to pretend with you anymore, and I know I can count on your loyalty."

"I shouldn't be too sure of that."

"Sam! You wouldn't—"

"Give you away? If I have to, I will. If it will force you away from that gang of criminals, I will. You wouldn't be the first Kimbolt to do a spell in jail, I'm sure. At least you would be safe there for a while."

"Oh, no, Sam. Nothing so pleasant as jail! Do you realize what sort of punishment the law metes out to smugglers? Floggings are the least of it. Hangings are common for those engaged in the sort of activity I specialize in. I smuggle the goods offshore and then transport illegal imports to premises owned by people who are only too willing to leave their doors unlocked so they can get their rewards. Even remote village churches are used as hides. Churches are sacrosanct and cannot be broken into by law. Samantha, my darling," he pulled on the reins and drew the horses to a halt, "if you cannot abide the way things are, perhaps you would be better off away from Hawksmere. Knowing what you now know, I would rather you were gone from here."

"And where to? Not back to Aunt Charlotte! She would never have me, anyway. No, Dick. There is no going back . . . only forward." She reached over and took the reins, clucking to the horses as she flicked them lightly. "I could find work of some kind—domestic, governessing, even as a lady's maid. Perhaps we could find employment in some household together. A farmer's household, maybe. You could be a bailiff, or even a shepherd. You have *some* knowledge of sheep—"

"No, Samantha! I am not in the least interested in farming. You must have realized that."

She smiled at him ruefully. "And you must have realized that I am not in the least interested in being a companion or a governess or even a lady's maid."

"I would have you be none of those things. Oh, my dear, what a pass our lives have come to! This blasted Mark Chaters . . . we are up against something, with a man like that, sister. By God, he's got a strong will. He made that pretty plain at our first encounter."

More plain than Dick suspected, Samantha reflected, remembering the man's impassioned attempt at seduction within five minutes of being left alone with her. Strong-willed and lustful, that was Mark Chaters. Suddenly, she found

herself wondering about her seducer. Indeed, there must be many men involved with the Owlers besides her brother and Jake Dempster. There might be many men, too, who would think it a fine lark to bed a strange woman in the darkness of night.

Even Mark Chaters . . .

Chapter 9



As Richard wheeled briskly into the courtyard, he reined in the horses so quickly that they reared to a halt. "Sorry, Sam," he exclaimed.

"No, please, I enjoy a little excitement," she laughed and looked over to see her brother's gaze riveted on a sedate black carriage outside the great front doors.

"Uncle Simeon, devil take him! What brings him here, I wonder?" Dick continued reflectively, as he slipped the reins over the bridge of the carriage. "He has wasted no time in coming, which means he must have heard of Mark's arrival. *Now* the sparks will fly!"

His normal gaiety had returned, stimulated by the prospect of a battle.

"What is he like?" Samantha asked, trying to remember what she had been told of her ministerial uncle. She could barely recall their only meeting three years previously.

"Very clerical and self-righteous, as one would expect. See his sober carriage? That is just like him. He would disapprove of anything more colorful and regard it as a sign of worldliness." Richard eyed her gray dress as he helped her down and then began handing the bandboxes to her. "He will thoroughly approve of *that*, so you need fear no criticism."

"I don't fear his criticism. In fact, I shall court it," she said mischievously. "I shall wear one of my new garments just for spite. What do you think of that?"

She raced upstairs to her room and, unbuttoning her hated gray dress for the last time, she hurled it into a far corner. After rinsing her face in cold water from a pitcher on a marble stand, splashing vigorously until her cheeks glowed, she felt refreshed and ready for anything. Unpinning her hair from the sedate braids plaited around her head, she let it tumble about her shoulders, then wielded a brush through the brilliant strands until they shone. Finally, almost reverently, she took from its wrappings her new morning dress and stepped into it.

Alice's mother certainly knew how to make clothes. She was wasted in a small place like Hythe, Samantha reflected, and wondered why she had decided to launch her business there. The logical answer was that she could afford neither Rye nor Folkestone. With the shrewd brain and skill the woman undoubtedly possessed, she would certainly advance in the world.

Samantha spun around before a long Cheval mirror, studying her reflection. She watched the swirl of the skirt and delighted in it. As she whirled about, so did her hair—a golden cloud against the bright green of the gown. No, she decided, she would *not* coil it sedately, and she would obey Mark's bidding never to hide it beneath a cap again.

Morocco slippers next, green to match the gown. Now she was ready. Descending the stairs with composure, she enjoyed the feeling of confidence her new appearance gave her, and glanced down to see her brother staring up at her with an expression of disbelief on his face. He uttered a low whistle. "Jove, Samantha, you look—"

"Like a new woman, I hope. I feel like one."

The library door opened and Mark ushered Uncle Simeon into the hall. The man, as Samantha now recollected, was tall and thin, a scholarly, aesthetic figure in his clerical garb, wearing a pair of bifocal spectacles. She studied him with interest. His hair was thin, but he wore it long in back.

The sound of her step made the men look up, and both halted immediately. Mark was inspecting her frankly, with a look of approval. But Uncle Simeon's reaction was quite different. Shock was evident in his face.

"I know what you remind me of, Samantha," Richard exclaimed, "that portrait an artist in Montmartre painted of

mother, wearing a green gown and with her hair all loose about her shoulders, just the way you have it now. She was the toast of Montmartre in those days and many people wanted to buy the portrait, but father would never part with it. When mother sold it to a dealer, he was heartbroken, but the money from it kept a roof over our heads for many months."

"You remember that, Dick? Why, you must have been no more than four!" Samantha came down the remaining stairs and took her brother's hands.

"I remember that story because father told it to us, but I *do* remember a picture of a woman with long golden hair and a green gown—not in detail, but the loveliness of it. And I remember the dark patch on the wallpaper where it used to hang. The surrounding wallpaper had faded, of course. How empty that spot seemed to make the room! I used to look up at it, wishing it would fade to match the rest of the wall, but wishing even more that we could get the picture back so the room would come alive again." He finished, "Father always said you would be mother all over again, and you are, Samantha. You are!"

Mark's eyes were on the Reverend Simeon Kimbolt. The reverend stood silent, his thin lips compressed, his figure rigid.

"Surely your uncle remembers the fair Clarissa?" Mark asked curiously.

"I do indeed," the man said curtly. Then he turned to his niece. "Well, so you are my brother's daughter."

"I am my mother's, too."

"That is obvious."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"There is no denying she was an attractive woman," her uncle said, stiffly, "although she caused this family and your father much hardship. Having to pawn pictures to pay the rent—well, the facts speak for themselves."

"I must say," Samantha retorted, walking past her brother with her hands on her hips, "that you place a higher value on worldly goods than I would expect from a man of God."

She saw quick anger in his eyes. She had dared to insult his cloth and that was a sacrilege for which she would not be forgiven.

Mark burst into spontaneous laughter. "Don't expect humility from your niece, Reverend. She can give as much as

she gets. And I must say, I don't blame her—that was an uncharitable remark you made."

Her uncle opened his mouth to speak, then checked his words. "I had no intention of being uncharitable," he said then, remembering his calling. "I was merely commiserating over your evident misfortunes." He shifted his weight uncomfortably. "Let us say no more about the past. Only the present is important, and it is the present that I have been discussing with Mr. Chaters. It is extremely kind of him to offer sanctuary to you both."

"Did you call to offer sanctuary to us yourself, Uncle? I do recall that you were unable to accommodate us when Father died." Samantha realized she was being unbearably rude, but this man seemed to invite that sort of treatment.

Mark looked as if he were enjoying this sparring, and smiled as he ushered everyone into the small study off the main hall.

"I do confess," Simeon muttered, "that my visit is not entirely due to concern over your welfare."

Mark hastily shut the door behind them, and Samantha could see that all traces of amusement had evaporated from his face. "Why dissemble, Reverend?" he barked, as he packed a long-stemmed pipe with tobacco from an earthenware jar on the desk top. "You called to protest my taking possession of Hawksmere before it was actually mine—perhaps you were hoping that the will could be upset even at this late stage. I guessed the object of your visit, although you approached it in a roundabout way. The news that my solicitors had sent over the final deeds spiked your guns, and the subject of your niece and nephew came obligingly to the rescue." He puffed leisurely at his pipe as the heady smoke filled the air.

"As for giving them 'sanctuary,' as you call it, on the contrary, I am employing them. No one will be added to this household who cannot be of use to it. Which reminds me, Dick, we have an appointment over at Oxney this afternoon. A breeder there has some sheep for sale, a reputable man whose stock is excellent. Those moth-eaten creatures outside will have to go. Their fleeces will yield nothing. And after that, we will be seeing the solicitor on the question of reclaiming the rights of marshland that my stepfather regretably parted with."

"You work quickly, sir." Dick was impressed, but Saman-

tha knew he was covering his real feelings about working for such a man.

"What other way is there to go about things?" Mark answered impatiently.

Uncle Simeon cleared his throat, waving smoke away from his white face. "It might not be easy to reclaim that land," he pointed out. "Some of my ancestors merely leased out individual tracts, but my brother Jonothan was unwise enough to sell."

"Then I shall seek other acres. Marshmen have a liking for money, and if one offers a good price . . ." Mark shrugged expressively and stood, plainly indicating the door. "Good day to you, Reverend, and thank you for calling."

But Simeon was not ready to go. "I trust I shall soon have the pleasure of meeting Mademoiselle de la Roche?" He smiled and smoothed two tufts of hair down over the sides of his spectacles.

"I trust so, too."

"I hear you have summoned a French émigré doctor to her—young André Devereaux. Rye is full of refugee families, and far be it from me to say they are unwelcome. I am simply curious as to why you did not choose our own trusted doctor. He has been Rye's medical practitioner for many years, and I fear he might well have cause to feel slighted."

"I see no reason for that," Mark said, moving impatiently to the door. Samantha thought he looked like a caged bull. "My fiancée's knowledge of English is limited, so it is common sense to call a doctor who speaks her tongue. And may I ask how you came to hear of my choice?"

"News travels fast in these parts. Actually, it was my daughter, Patience, who first heard of it and imparted the information to me." He shook his head sorrowfully. "Alas, the dear girl has a regrettable tendency to listen to local gossip. A worthy woman from my congregation comes daily to lend a hand, and she also cleans Dr. Devereaux's lodgings. Naturally, the two women talk together of flighty matters. I must apologize for my daughter's weakness, but perhaps it is excusable since she is motherless and somewhat lonely, particularly since my sister Charlotte left my house some eight years ago to reside in London."

Samantha looked up at the mention of her aunt's name, and suddenly recalled that Charlotte had never told her much about anything unless it was connected with a scolding.

"Believe me," Uncle Simeon said, rising and walking over

to Mark, who backed away a step as though from a bad odor, "there is nothing inquisitive about my interest, merely a Christian concern and a desire to be of help. My daughter, too. I will see that Patience calls upon your betrothed to assuage her loneliness."

"Thank you. She will be welcome."

"And am I to take it that you also have taken up residence here?" Simeon shifted his gaze to the floor.

Humor quivered at the corners of Mark's mouth, and he took another puff at his pipe. "I have indeed, sir, but rest assured that all the properties are being observed, and Miss Kimbolt's presence in the house assures Germaine of companionship."

"My niece appears somewhat young to act as chaperone and hardly—"

Hardly respectable enough? Was that what he had in mind? Samantha reflected in amusement. He would consider her even less so were he to know what had happened to her last night! She turned away to hide a betraying rush of color. Mark Chaters must never know of her experiences in the summer house, she reflected, stealing a glance at him, nor how she had reveled in every ecstatic moment, else he would have good cause to consider her wanton and thus ripe for his own philandering.

"And when will the marriage take place?" Simeon asked Mark.

"As soon as Germaine is well. I am bringing no pressure to bear on her until then."

With a stiff smile of approval, her uncle extended his hand in farewell. It was rather a fishlike hand, Samantha thought involuntarily, and seemed thin and flat in Mark's gigantic palm. Mark dropped the hand rather quickly, and accompanied Simeon to the front door as Samantha and Dick trailed behind.

At the door, Uncle Simeon turned and nodded his head vigorously at Mark. "I am glad to hear you have plans for Hawksmere, sir. This re-stocking with good sheep is an excellent idea. But if I may sound a word of warning—Beware of the Owlers, my friend. It is rumored they are at work again."

"The Owlers?" Dick echoed innocently. "What the devil are they?"

This profanity drew from the Reverend Simeon an expression of pained reproof that was quite lost on his nephew.

"The Owlery of Romney Marsh," Mark put in blandly. "So they are on the loose again, are they? After all these years?"

Once the front door had closed behind her uncle, Mark made his excuses to Dick and seized Samantha's hand.

"I compliment you on your dress, Samantha," he said as he whisked her upstairs. "Germaine must see it at once. It will do her good—encourage her to take an interest in herself again. She has always loved clothes, but in her present state she is apathetic." He called down to the bottom landing where Dick stood, "Don't go, Dick. You and I are taking a walk around the estate before leaving for Oxney. And be advised—Tomorrow you rise early, as your sister does. I saw her polishing the library furniture when I came down for breakfast at seven. She must have been up for an hour, at least."

Dick threw her a reproachful glance, and without another word Mark strode on to Germaine's room.

"I don't always rise at six," Samantha said, panting a little in an effort to keep up with his immense stride.

He glanced at her sideways, quizzing her.

"Then I wonder why you were up and about so early today? Did something disturb your night's rest?"

She had the uncomfortable feeling that he was mocking her, and could not meet his eyes.

"I trust you will soon become accustomed to your new quarters," he continued smoothly. "I also trust you refurnished your wardrobe adequately?"

"More than adequately, thank you. I fear I may have been on the extravagant side, but you did give me *carte blanche*, and the dressmaker was encouraging."

"The Turner woman? Her work is good, I believe."

When they reached the door of the master bedroom, it became instantly clear that Mark had completely forgotten about Samantha. His eyes were riveted on the small, delicate creature in the immense bed.

Germaine looked better. She had obviously slept well, for the shadows beneath her eyes had diminished, making them appear less sunken and more beautiful than ever.

"Look at Samantha, my love," Mark cooed, all tenderness as he sat beside Germaine and drew her close. "Doesn't it make you look forward to wearing your beautiful clothes again?"

She smiled in genuine admiration. "Indeed! I would

scarcely have known her! So statuesque!" she exclaimed, whereupon Samantha immediately felt like an Amazon.

At that moment, Piper tapped on the door.

"Come," Mark called out, and the woman entered.

"If you please, sir," she said in a humble tone that sounded imposed on her harsh voice, "it's that French doctor from Rye."

As André Devereaux entered the room, Mark leaned over and kissed his fiancée. "Convention demands that I leave, my sweet, but Samantha will be at your side during the examination. I will return shortly." He strode to the door. "Good day, Doctor," he said, and gave Samantha a look that said, Make sure she is well looked after.

"*Bonjour, mesdemoiselles*," said Devereaux in a light, musical voice. He was a small, compact man with a shock of dark, almost black, hair and penetrating, deep brown eyes. He wore a small pointed beard, neatly trimmed. In fact, his entire demeanor was neat and careful. Although his gray suit was shabby and worn, he gave the appearance of a man who had once known prosperity.

Samantha gave him a nod and led him to the bed. "If you would please untie your gown," he asked Germaine. Reluctantly, pursing her lips in distaste, she did as she was told.

"Are you in any pain?" he asked as he listened to her heart.

"Pain?" she remarked, thrusting his hands aside. Samantha was embarrassed for the good doctor. Germaine treated him as if he were a peasant and therefore an enemy. And yet he, like herself, had gone through a harrowing escape from France, which meant that he, too, was of aristocratic birth. Samantha wondered how long it would take to overcome this mistrust in Germaine, which seemed to apply to everyone except Mark.

"I take it, then, you have no great discomfort?" He straightened up from the bed and walked toward Samantha. She noticed he had a slight limp. She found herself staring at his hands, the hands that had just touched Germaine's breast, and wondered if possibly they could have been those of her own midnight lover. She nearly laughed aloud as she chided herself for jumping to the most extreme conclusions. Her lover had certainly had no beard!

"I feel certain, mademoiselle," Devereaux was saying, "that all you suffer from is fatigue and emotional strain. Time

will overcome these. You have endured much, but so, alas, have hundreds of our compatriots."

"And what have you endured, *M'sieur le Docteur*?" Germaine demanded sharply.

He was silent for a moment, and then answered quietly, "The loss of wife and child. I would have preferred them to escape with their lives, rather than me. Instead, I am here, and so are you. We have to go on living and fight against self-pity." He went to the door. "Mr. Chaters," he called, "you may enter now."

Mark, who had been pacing the corridor outside, stalked back into the room.

"I would suggest, m'sieu'," the doctor said in a voice loud enough to be overheard, "that m'amselle spends no more time in bed being pampered and indulged. We have much to be grateful for, she and I. We have sanctuary in this country —"

"For how long?" she burst out, sitting up suddenly against the headboard. "How long before the blood-letting spreads across the Channel?"

Devereaux closed his bag and turned to the door.

"Live for the day, mademoiselle, and thank God for your blessings. You have a home and soon you will have an English husband. As for me, I have my work, which I am allowed to carry on here without prejudice. If you wish me to call again, m'sieu', I will do so, but not if Mademoiselle de la Roche mistrusts me."

At that, Germaine burst into tears. Samantha saw Mark gather her into his arms as she preceded the doctor through the door and followed him down the stairs. He paused when they reached the front hallway.

"I fear this will be my last visit," he shrugged. "M'sieur Chaters will not forgive my blunt speaking."

Blunt speaking, Samantha reflected, was something of which Mark was more than capable himself, but harshness toward Germaine was another matter.

"You think I was tactless, Miss Kimbolt?" Devereaux persisted when she gave him no answer. "You are Samantha Kimbolt, are you not?—cousin of Patience?"

"You know her?"

"Indeed, yes, but had you not been introduced, I would never have suspected that you were related. You resemble her in no way."

"We have never met, but I am anxious to do so."

"You will like her, I am sure. Poor Patience." He held out his hand in farewell. "I hope we may meet again in more amiable circumstances." His thin, finely drawn face smiled. There was friendliness and liking in that smile, and she realized that he was really very handsome, a fact that his earlier seriousness had concealed.

They reached the courtyard, where he untethered his horse. It was not a particularly fine specimen but obviously the best he could afford. He put a foot in the stirrup and swung into the saddle.

"I do appeal to you to see that Mademoiselle de la Roche is not overindulged," he said urgently.

"How can I prevent it? Mr. Chaters dotes on her."

"That is obvious, and consequently he is likely to spoil her, which is the worst thing he can do. Lying in bed will only give her time to brood. Try to persuade her to get up—"

The sound of Mark's heavy tread on the coarse gravel walk cut across his words. "I respect your professional opinion, doctor," he said impatiently, pushing back the shock of flaming red hair that the wind had disturbed, "but not your manner. When next you come, please remember that mademoiselle is deeply sensitive."

Devereaux looked at Samantha and sighed lightly. "The young woman is perfectly healthy, and whatever she has endured has not broken her, either mentally or physically, as with others. She must not be encouraged to feel sorry for herself. If that type of pandering is what you want for her, you must send for another doctor."

He bowed to Samantha and departed, riding through the broken-down gates without a backward glance.

"Well, I will say this for him," Mark's voice sounded close to her ear. "He may be an impoverished émigré in need of money, but he doesn't seek it by ingratiating himself." He stalked back toward the doors, shaking his head. "Even so, I won't have Germaine bullied. And now, if you will go up to her, I think you will find her willing to get up for a while after luncheon. Help her to choose something pretty to wear. It will do much to restore her spirits."

Irritated by his doting solicitude, Samantha departed willingly. As she climbed the stairs to the master bedroom, she decided the French girl was welcome to his concern for so long as it lasted—which, in a man who did not scruple to make advances to other women, would not be forever. She considered Mark Chaters to be no better than Jake Demp-

ster, beneath his façade of culture and good manners. On the other hand, a man like André Devereaux seemed genuine. He was the sort with the capacity to make one woman honestly happy.

Germaine's piquant little face showed a certain animation as Samantha entered the room and suggested she hold up garments for Germaine's inspection. The French girl, after much vacillation, finally selected a peignoir of deep blue, in which to sit by her window for a short spell. "I am much too fatigued to face more," she protested, tossing her hair and letting her dark curls fall prettily about her shoulders.

"But tomorrow morning I will help you dress to come downstairs. We will choose a day gown then." Samantha brought the garment to the bed and pulled back the covers so that Germaine could climb out.

"It will be the ruby velvet. *Maman*, she always loved me in that."

As Samantha was about to leave the room, the French girl stopped her. "That doctor is not to be trusted," she said in a hushed tone. "He is here under false pretenses."

"What do you mean?" Samantha turned back in shocked surprise.

"That he is not what he pretends to be. Oh, I am not doubting the medical qualifications. *Oui*, yet. He is *docteur*, but he is not aristocrat. This I can tell. He lacks the stamp of the true *aristo*. It might be wise to encourage him to make another visit here so I may watch him with care."

Samantha stared at the French girl blankly. Apathetic, had she thought her? The doctor's visit seemed to have jolted the girl out of that.

"Have you mentioned this to Mark?"

"Not yet. He has had enough anxiety over me. I am not wishing to add to it."

"But why should it? Mark would simply employ another doctor if that were your wish, though why you should object to Devereaux merely because you don't consider him aristocratic enough to serve you, I fail to understand. And," she said, taking a deep breath and a step forward into the room, "I confess I don't like your attitude."

Germaine shook her head sadly. "*Ma chère* Samantha, you certainly do not understand. A man who is not an *aristo* does not seek foreign shores as a refugee unless he has a purpose."

"What are you suggesting?" she asked angrily.

"Suggest? No. I am saying it: His purpose is spying. And

Mark is a boatbuilder, a shipper with connections in Calais and elsewhere. Why should the men he employs not line their pockets? I must try to help him find out, since he is the one who would be held responsible for any illicit trading. And if spies watched his ships from this end, and saw the arrival of émigrés, word would be sent back. The next time his crews attempted to smuggle refugees aboard, *poof!* the National Guard . . . they would arrest them before they could sail from France. *Terrible!* Mark's vessels could be seized and confiscated."

Samantha listened to this outburst patiently, no longer knowing what to believe. Germaine had come across recently—perhaps some of what she said was true. "Then you must warn him," she suggested quietly.

"Not until I have proof. Sooner or later André Devereaux must give himself away. Until then, I command you to silence. Indiscreet talk is dangerous. This is something I have learned to my cost."

So. You are not the lethargic little kitten I thought, Samantha reflected as she gave Germaine a slight nod and left the room, closing the door behind her. And then she wondered, Are your hidden claws as sharp as your eyes and your wits?

Chapter 10



Mark sat beside Samantha at the luncheon table devouring a great haunch of venison. A good thing, Samantha thought, that her new employer was wealthy, with an appetite like the one he possessed—for women as well as for food.

"Your Uncle Simeon is a gossipy old man," he said to Dick who was seated opposite, "but in this instance I intend to heed what he says. He cannot avoid hearing things as he goes on his parish rounds, so I propose to heed his warning about the Owlers. We must keep a sharp lookout, young Dick, because the sheep I intend to buy will yield valuable fleeces, and I'll have the hide off the back of any smuggler who tries to steal them. Remember that, boy." He brandished a chuck of venison in the air for emphasis, making Samantha smile behind her napkin, for she was naturally fearful of betraying her brother.

Dutifully, Richard answered that he would be attentive.

Samantha kept her glance lowered. One flicker of her eye might give her away. Although her appetite was light, she made a great display of paying attention to her food because in this way she could avoid looking at Mark, who, she felt, was too observant for comfort. Even with her eyes lowered, she knew his attention had turned to her. He kept glancing at

the abundant mass of shining hair lying freely about her neck and shoulders.

"I do believe," Mark commented, "it is your Uncle Simeon who compels his unfortunate daughter to bind up and cover her hair on all occasions. A severe man, indeed. You have not met your Cousin Patience, is that correct?"

"Not yet," Samantha admitted, wondering if she even wanted to. If Patience resembled her sanctimonious father, they would have little in common.

"I know her by sight," Mark added, "as I expect you do, Dick."

Richard nodded. His path, fortunately, rarely crossed that of his cousin, for Richard was no churchgoer and the haunts he enjoyed in Rye were never those a parson's daughter would enter.

"Perhaps I should call upon her," Samantha suggested, for want of something to say. Why she should feel so self-conscious in Mark's presence, she had no idea.

Eventually, her plate empty, she was forced to look up and, as she had known they would be, his eyes were upon her. He was doing no more than toying with his food, so intent was his scrutiny.

"I must compliment Mrs. Turner on her talent," he said. "Did she influence you in choosing that color, or was the selection yours?"

"Her own, if I know Samantha," Dick put in. "When we first arrived in England, she wore a most becoming ensemble made of green velvet. I think I remember it best of anything you ever wore, Sam, because of that portrait of mother."

Samantha smiled over at him, sharing the memory.

"Green becomes you," Mark agreed. "What happened to that portrait eventually, do you know? If I could trace it, I would buy it back and ask you to accept it as a gift. It could grace the bedchamber in which, I gather, you slept so uncomfortably last night."

Could his eyes possibly be teasing? She glanced at him sharply, only to see a bland expression on his face and a kind smile on his mouth.

"My offer carries no ulterior motives, I assure you," he said. "I would be happy to offer a price for the painting that the present owner, whoever he or she may be, should be more than happy to accept."

Samantha doubted his assurance regarding the lack of an ulterior motive, but she had to admit that the man had made

her a kind offer. Perhaps somewhere in that brusque and arrogant manner, he had a soft place—even if it only existed on the subject of mothers and fiancées! She thanked him politely.

"The picture was sold to a Paris dealer," she said sadly, laying her napkin beside her plate, "so its whereabouts would no doubt be untraceable. It might even have been burned with other works of art. It is known that the mob plundered not only private homes, but art galleries and museums."

"But many things escaped," he assured her. "The treasures of Versailles, for instance, were sold to buyers throughout the world, Windsor Castle now housing many of them. Who knows, your mother's portrait may be found someday."

"What about the treasures of the de la Roche chateau?" she asked, curious to see his reaction.

"If they can also be traced, I shall buy them for Germaine, of course." He pushed back his chair, closing the conversation, and Samantha left the two men to enjoy a sweetmeat of morella cherries in brandy. Fond as she was of this dessert, she could stand no more talk of Germaine.

She inclined her head coolly as Mark opened the door for her, only to be puzzled by him yet again. His eyes, intent on her face, held a riddle she could not solve, a question she could not answer. It was as if he read her every thought and allowed none of his own to escape for her perusal.

After Mark and Richard had left for the Isle of Oxney, Samantha decided to take a walk in the grounds. It was a bit chilly, so she threw a white challis shawl around her shoulders. She was also wearing an elaborate chatelaine, which she had discovered in one of the unused kitchen cupboards. Attached to this girdle was a delicate pair of silver scissors—a memento of Uncle Jonothan's dead wife, perhaps. They would be perfect for gardening and pruning. The scissors needed sharpening, but surely Thomas could do that for her, and maybe tell her where they came from as well. There was also a silver thimble that fitted her finger perfectly, and the usual small case of sewing needles and thread in the drawer. Next to these, she had found a key that looked as if it might have belonged to a jewel case, and a silver-backed tablet on which to jot down household reminders, with a sliver of slate, elongated and pointed, for the task.

The whole chatelaine was an elegant and costly adornment, vastly superior to the run-of-the-mill belt worn by Martha Piper. But now that Samantha was in charge of putting

Hawksmere into good order, it seemed only appropriate that she should wear it.

She began her walk away from the area of the broken boundary wall. More than anything, she wanted to visit the summer house again, and yet something held her back. To see the chaise on which her unknown lover had seduced her would bring back memories too disturbing to be tolerated; fears, too, and the dread she now felt of discovering the man's identity. It would be better never to know it and thereby avoid the shock of learning the type of man he had really been. Of course, as reason reminded her, she knew that already—a ruffian and a rogue—what else could he be and why else should he have been out there with the smugglers after dark? Obviously, he had been one of the lookouts, trained to kill. Only her physical surrender had saved her life. He had spared her merely because he had enjoyed her body and intended to do so again, which meant that he would come in search of her whenever he chose.

The thought filled her with a mixture of delight and dread. If he could remain her midnight lover forever, face unseen, voice unknown, her secret picture of him could remain unsullied. But if she ever saw his features, the dream would vanish and she would be forced to accept the reality of her actions.

Thrusting such confusing thoughts aside, Samantha embarked on her exploration of the grounds. She was both impressed and saddened by them. They fanned away on either side of the abbey and toward the edge of the cliffs. At one time the gardens must have been beautiful; even now a certain magnificence lingered, but tranquillity and orderliness had been overcome by a jungle of wild growth. The lawns needed scything, hedges trimming, roses pruning. Samantha knew little about gardening, but found herself enjoying the task of nipping off dead buds and woody stems from the surrounding bushes.

The task of trimming off dead blooms proved monotonous, but Samantha was so happy to have her mind taken off her problems that she kept at it until the sun was low in the west. As she moved along, clipping away, she discovered that she had reached an area close to the broken wall, despite her intention to stay away from it. She approached cautiously. The spot was at the far end of the rear strip of lawn and, close to where she stood, cloisters ran along the back of the ancient building, culminating in an archway with a solid oaken door

leading into the abbey. Beyond this door were the library windows, which had afforded her such an excellent view last night. Her glance traveled back to the cloisters and saw that they turned a corner, linking with an adjacent wing set back like its counterpart on the other side. Both spread outward from the central tower that now contained the main living quarters. And within the angle, a man stood watching her. It was Dempster.

"I should come away from ther missie. It be dangerous."

The sight of him so startled Samantha that she jerked around, her heart pounding. "What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the fields, or tending the sheep?"

"Not anymore, if the new master has his way. Seems he has some idea about replacing me, or so Master Richard told me when I was in Hythe buying meal this morning. I came up to the house to find out the truth of it, only to learn from Martha Piper that Master Chaters has gone out."

"He has, yes, and I am sorry to hear you may be dismissed." She stared at his tall, muscular figure.

"Aye, and I am sorry as well. Ye really should come away from that spot, missie. Ye might go falling to your death like her who went before."

Refusing to let him see that he alarmed her, she remained where she was, with her back to the broken wall and the sheer drop below.

"I don't know what you mean, Dempster. I am not likely to fall over a boundary wall."

"If ye lean against that part ye will. Mayhap ye don't know that it needs repairing. Loose, those slabs are. Mayhap ye're not aware of that, either?"

Was he testing her? Did he know that she had stood not a few yards away, only last night, watching the smugglers taking full advantage of that crumbling wall?

She looked at it casually and strolled forward. "I still don't see what you are doing in these cloisters. This area belongs to the private part of the abbey." If he could test her, then she could do the same to him.

"And one of my duties, when I'm not tending sheep," he grinned, "is to keep these cloisters swept."

She saw then that he held a broom made of birch twigs, and she felt immediately embarrassed. She walked on, trying to ignore the smirk on his face. It was essential not to let this man know that he had the power to disconcert her.

It was then that she saw, where the cloisters joined the west

wing, another arched and studded door. A swift calculation suggested that it led directly to the kitchens. Promptly, she walked toward it, anxious to get away from the man. She simply could not stop herself from staring at his hands clutching the long handle of the broom, nor could she put her mind to anything but the possibility that he might be her midnight lover.

He followed her boldly.

"Perhaps ye'd be good enough to use your influence with the new master, missie?"

She looked down and shrugged lightly. "I have no influence with the new master, and the matter does not concern me—though, as I said, I regret your plight."

"I am quite sure a pretty young lady such as ye could influence a man if she wanted to."

"I do not want to. And kindly address me as Miss Kimbolt."

She could feel two spots of color burning her cheeks.

The man laughed. "So it's hoity-toity, is it? Now really, everyone knows the Kimbolts came down in the world long ago, so those airs ye put on ain't justified . . . missie."

"I can't—"

"I want to tell you," he said in a soft voice, very close to her now, "I could be mightily useful one day. I'd go carefully if I were ye, missie," He slapped a hand over his mouth sarcastically, then added, "I mean Miss Kimbolt, to be sure."

There was a sound from above. Samantha glanced up and saw Germaine sitting by her open window, watching. How much had she seen or heard, and was her discreet cough intended to let Samantha know that the man's behavior was observed—or to let *him* know? Either way, Samantha was grateful. Dempster took a step away. "I'll be goin' then," he said cheerily. "Take care now." He started back to the cloisters, his walk as self-confident as ever. He had a decided animal grace that Samantha could well imagine attracting women. Even herself, she acknowledged privately on her way toward the kitchens.

She went on her way to the door which, she surmised, led to the kitchens, only to find that it opened into a small stone-walled room with rusted gardening tools propped against the walls, leaving a clearing in the middle. At the far end another door stood ajar. Hurrying through, she found herself in a long passage with doors on the outer side revealing a row of cells, each with small grilled windows set

high in the wall. She recalled Dick's long-ago description of "a vast maze of sprawling passages and unconverted cells." She shivered as she hurried along, looking for a door into the inhabited part.

Samantha had been impressed by the size of Hawksmere as they approached it across the countryside, but only now, lost as she was in that confusing maze of passages and cells, did she fully comprehend how vast it was. Not until she was about to turn back to retrace her steps did she come across what she believed to be the entrance to the kitchens—the reverse side of the locked door at the end of the scullery passage. It had been stupid to come this way, for it yielded no access.

The unfamiliar smell that she had detected even through the thickness of that door was very strong on this side of it. It was a stale smell, tinged with oiliness or grease. Curiosity made her glance through some of the open cell doors; all were stark and empty.

She quickened her steps, eager to escape from this clammy emptiness and as she hurried, the draught from the distant outside door swirled dust and cobwebs about her ankles. She gathered up the skirt of her precious new gown, thoroughly vexed with herself for entering here. She felt musty and in total disarray.

Thankfully, she reached the room containing the garden implements and was soon out in the cloisters again. After the darkness within, the light seemed additionally bright. She put up a hand to shade her eyes, and her fingers became entangled in her hair. No, not her hair . . . something that refused to be shaken free. She pulled her hand away and looked at it curiously. The fingers were covered in wool; strands of sheep's wool were blown into her hair along with dust and cobwebs.

So this was the hiding place for fleeces, where the Owlers came at dead of night, hell-bent on their nefarious deeds. The cells were the hides Dick had referred to, left open after last night's plundering, but still barred from the living quarters of the abbey by that locked inner door. But nothing could remove the lingering smell of freshly shorn, untreated sheep's wool.

She brushed her hands together, shaking the fragments free, and sought the entrance leading from the garden back into the central tower. She resolutely averted her eyes as she passed the strip of lawn spanning the rear of the building, with the stone wall high above the marsh and the ill-concealed

gap through which the smugglers hauled their illegal booty. She hurried indoors, shivering slightly, rubbing her hands over her arms.

In her room she took off her shawl and dress, shook them and brushed them free of dust and cobwebs and strands of wool. She was thankful to see that otherwise the dress was unsoiled. She had to bless Victoria Turner for stocking such good material; anything inferior would have marked. Changing shoes and hose, she then washed herself and brushed her hair thoroughly. When finished, the brush was thick with wool. She combed it from the bristles and pushed it into a hair-tidy hanging beside her dressing table mirror. The soft, fine quality of this wool surprised her. It surely did not come from the ragged sheep outside, but from other sources. These had to be stolen fleeces, from richer farms.

Presentable once more, she tapped on Germaine's door, but received no reply. She waited for a moment and knocked again. At last she heard Germaine call, "*Entrez.*"

As she opened the door and stepped inside, she was startled to see the future mistress of Hawksmere no longer wearing the blue peignoir, but her ruby red gown.

Samantha paused in surprise. Now she knew why her first knock had been ignored. Germaine had been changing into her mother's favorite gown. Although the girl had declared that she had never dressed herself in her life, she seemed to have completed her unaccustomed task supremely well. Even her hair was dressed, and jewels adorned her throat.

Germaine turned abruptly from the window where she had been leaning out, and gave Samantha a glance of cold surprise. This she ignored, deciding to do her utmost to be pleasant. "Why don't you come downstairs since you have gone to so much trouble with your toilet? It will please Mark, when he returns."

"You mean M'sieur Chaters, I think."

Stung, Samantha retorted, "My apologies, m'amselle. I used his Christian name because he uses ours, and asked us to reciprocate."

Germaine sighed, dragging herself to her feet. "I suppose I may as well sit downstairs as up here, especially since that impertinent doctor implied that I was only pretending to be fatigued." Her voice was annoyed and petulant, that of a tedious child.

"I am sure he meant no such thing; merely that it is bad for you to lie abed, brooding."

"I will lie abed if I choose!"

"As you wish. But if you come downstairs now, I will order tea for you. In fact, I will brew it myself."

Germaine stamped her tiny foot, and her curls flew every which way.

"I am not an invalid! And I won't be condescended to. Perhaps you adopted that manner with the elderly aunt you lived with? Mark has told me of your background."

Samantha smiled, amused by the thought of ever speaking to Aunt Charlotte as if she were a child!

Germaine gathered up her skirts and swept ahead to the stairs. Her back was slim and erect, her carriage proud. Without warning, Germaine stopped, turned, and flung out her arms.

"Forgive me! I am not myself yet. Believe me, I am not usually so cross. Be patient with me, I beg."

Samantha's heart melted. She found herself stroking the rich chestnut curls, just as Mark had done, and murmuring words of reassurance in the same way—except that he murmured them like a lover, and Samantha like a sister.

Germaine clung to her. "Oh, Samantha, I am lucky to have you here!"

Samantha was astounded, but grateful for Germaine's change of heart. "Lucky also in the man you are going to marry," she said, taking the French girl's hand in hers.

"I am indeed. He adores me. There is nothing he would not do for me, nothing he would not forgive." She drew a delicate hand across her forehead, as if evoking a picture of Mark in her mind.

"I can believe that."

"And please do not address me as mademoiselle! It is I who should address you formally, since I am the younger."

"I am twenty. Not exactly ancient."

"Even so, older than I by two years. Do not argue! From now on, I am Germaine to you."

"I shall prefer that." Samantha smiled and tugged at Germaine's hand. Together they walked down the stairs and into the drawing room. Samantha rang for tea, but Germaine held up one hand in protest.

"I should so love coffee," she sighed, "though I imagine this household cannot produce it in the true French fashion, dark and strong, only slightly filtered with water. I do not care for the *café au lait*, so diluted with milk." She wrinkled up her nose at the thought.

"But I can make it as you prefer, so if you dislike what the kitchen produces, I will make it personally in the future."

"*Dieu, merci!* I was afraid I might be expected to adopt this deplorable tea-drinking habit of the English."

"With the price of tea at £1 per pound, only the wealthy can afford our deplorable tea-drinking habit. Perhaps it is as well for Mark's coffers that you prefer coffee." Samantha laughed, raising her hands in mock horror. Germaine made an enchanting little grimace. "Oh, dear, now you sound like an elder sister!"

She was a mercurial person, swinging from depression to gaiety in a matter of minutes. Samantha hoped the gaiety would last, even at her expense. It was easier to tolerate than patronage or petulance.

Alice answered the bell, explaining that it was Mrs. Piper's afternoon off, whereupon Germaine stood and began pacing angrily around the room. "But I have scarcely arrived in this household! How dare she take an afternoon off so soon! Please be good enough to express my displeasure over Mrs. Piper's absence."

Alice merely replied, "I take it you are wanting tea?"

"Mademoiselle would prefer coffee," Samantha cut in hastily, "so I will have the same."

Alice said politely enough that she would see to it at once, and when it arrived both Germaine and Samantha were surprised by its excellence.

"Did you make this yourself?" Samantha asked, placing her cup on the table before her.

The girl admitted that she had.

"Then I congratulate you, Alice," Germaine declared. "It is as good as French."

"I totally agree," Samantha nodded. Alice would be quite a help, she reflected, once that defiant veneer of hers was penetrated.

"Naturally. My mother numbers many French amongst her clients, now Rye and Folkstone are becoming full of them. She likes to serve coffee to them in their own fashion, and has taught me how to do it."

At that precise moment they heard the front doors slam and within moments Mark and Dick entered the room. Mark's face brightened at the sight of Germaine.

"So you are up, my love! This is excellent. I am sure you will feel better for it." He came to her side and kneeled to put an arm around her waist.

"Because that ill-mannered doctor said so?" Germaine glanced up at Dick who, Samantha noted, was staring at the French girl admiringly. He did have an eye for a pretty face.

"No. Because to see you sitting beside the fire, prettily gowned, does my heart good, and must surely do the same for yours. And Devereaux may be forthright, but I don't think he means to be ill-mannered."

Germaine shrugged.

"He may be my fellow countryman, but I dislike him."

"He has suffered, too," Mark pointed out, pushing a curl off her forehead.

"So he says. And for that you excuse his callousness!"

The petulance had returned, causing the soft, full-lipped mouth to droop and the pretty forehead to crease. Even so, she was robbed of none of her beauty which, Samantha could tell from her brother's face, captivated him.

Samantha turned to Alice to ask for two more cups, but the order died on her lips. The girl was standing by one far window, her whole attention focused on Dick. When he stooped over Germaine's hand and kissed it, Alice turned away sharply, evidently hurt by the gesture. Samantha could see that the housemaid was more than a little in love with her brother. Could he not see this? Dick would have to be warned not to philander with Alice Turner's affections.

"Kindly bring two more cups, Alice," Samantha said pointedly, "and replenish the coffee pot."

The girl jerked to attention, bobbed an unwilling courtsey, picked up the pot and departed. No one but Samantha heeded the sharp little slam of the door.

Mark was talking about the sheep he had bought at Oxney, and Germaine was stifling a yawn. She did not try to hide the fact that such conversation bored her, and since Richard was making no effort to join in, but was sitting there absorbed in contemplation of her, Samantha felt obligated to be sociable. She said the first thing that came into her head.

"I hope the shearing sheds will be repaired so the sheep need no longer be shorn in those damp musty cells," she commented, leaning over to place another small log on the fire.

"Which cells?" Mark asked quickly.

"The disused monks' cells in the west wing. I wandered there by mistake, and came out covered in wool." She looked from Mark's face to her brother's, unconcerned by his startled expression. She had guessed that Richard would

know the real use of the cells, but if she could put a spike in the wheels of the smuggling fraternity that had ensnared her brother when so young, she was not averse to it.

Alice returned with the extra cups and fresh coffee, putting down the tray respectfully enough, but with that touch of secret resentment that underlaid everything she did. Samantha was glad to have something to which to turn her attention. As she handed a cup to Mark, Germaine cut in, "You certainly looked a sorry sight."

"So, you saw me? I hoped you would not."

"I also saw you talking to that man . . . Dempster is his name—*Oui*? That was why I made my presence noticed, and he had the good sense to depart. He looks the insolent fellow, and you did find him so, I believe. Mark, please, I hope you will replace him."

"I intend to. You warned him of that, did you not, Richard? I have engaged an experienced man, and Dempster will receive his marching orders from me personally, so rout him out later on, Dick, and send him to me. He will be suitably compensated, though I doubt if he deserves to be."

"Why?" Samantha asked. "What has he done?" She stood and walked over to Mark.

"He won't like it, even so," Richard interjected shaking his head.

"That is unfortunate—for him." Mark turned to Samantha. "I don't know that he has done anything, exactly—not for years, and that is what I find objectionable about him. He also has a roving eye for the ladies." Quickly he turned and placed a hand on Germaine's shoulder. "I do apologize, my love, for speaking bluntly, but I speak the truth."

Samantha felt the color come into her cheeks, and hastily changed the subject. "But I must say, I was surprised by the quality of the wool on me. It was softer and finer than I expected, judging by the present flock."

"I hope you kept a sample," Richard said, quelling his fury about the topic of conversation Samantha had raised. Any sample from the hides would reveal that fleeces from other sources were stored there, and the reason for that would be obvious. He was uncertain about this new master of Hawksmere, what he would think of smuggling on his very premises? And yet, Mark was wealthy, and therefore could be involved himself. He might be hiding behind his legitimate business activities to avert suspicion. This uncertainty put Richard on his guard, so he added lightly, "I would like to be

able to convince Mark that our stock has not been wholly neglected."

"If you do want a sample," Samantha offered, "I can produce it. I have some in a hair-tidy on my dressing table."

"It would be interesting to examine it," Mark said casually, as though he did not care one way or the other. Again, Samantha was aware of his eyes on her. The man was so infuriating with his staring!

Richard finished his coffee and laid aside his cup. As he did so, the door closed quietly and, looking around, Samantha saw that Alice had gone.

"More coffee, Dick?"

He declined, and begged to be excused. He bowed to Germaine and she dismissed him with a charming inclination of her head and a sweet smile. Oh, Dick, Samantha thought, seeing infatuation grow in her brother's face. Watch out! Don't let that susceptible heart of yours run away with you.

Falling in love with the woman Mark was to marry would be even more dangerous than philandering with Alice.

Shortly after that, Samantha also made her excuses and departed, leaving Mark and Germaine alone. As she went up to her room, she wondered if she would always feel like an uninvited guest when she was with them. She felt uncomfortable in their presence, aware that two people in love had no desire for the company of a third. Beyond that, she would not examine her feelings.

Before going down to see Mrs. Thomas about the evening meal—roast sturgeon cooked on a lark-spit and followed by veal cutlets seasoned with parsley, thyme, knotted marjoram and nutmeg—she remembered her brother's request for the wool sample. If it would help to convince Mark that Dick was not an indifferent worker, she was more than willing to produce it. She went to her dressing table and drew back in surprise as she looked down. The hair-tidy was empty.

Chapter 11



She was trying to puzzle out what might have happened to the sample when it occurred to her that there might be more than two smugglers connected with Hawksmere. Or had her brother come in unbeknown to her and taken the wool? As she thought of the smugglers taking the fleeces from the abbey and hurrying with them down to the gap in the wall, her mind changed direction suddenly, and an image of her unknown lover formed in her mind. A smuggler indeed, but a masculine presence who had brought excitement and fulfillment into her drab life. She had an overwhelming desire to visit the summer house again, and the hair-tidy be damned. She wanted to inspect the place more closely. Perhaps her lover might have left some sign behind—a handkerchief, or even the scarf that had covered his face. Torn between the tormenting desire to know his identify and an equal fear of doing so, she was impelled by her own impassioned instincts to touch the cushions again, to lie upon them and close her eyes and remember those moments of delight.

She had only to recline upon the velvet-covered chaise and close her eyes and then she would conjure up the man who had made love to her with such tenderness. Then every doubt

and fear would be dispelled—even that of the disappearing wool.

She had left the door unlocked when she departed in the early morning hours; she had only to slip down the staircase in the east wing and stroll across the lawn. If anyone should see her, it would appear that she was merely taking a walk in the garden. She did not glance back as she left the house, but went straight across the lawn to the place she now regarded as the sanctuary of her love. It was built of stone, thatched, had diamond-paned windows and before its front door of studded oak was a paved area on which, no doubt, the white wrought iron garden furniture had been placed in summertime, for milady to take her tea.

For only a lady could have chosen each item of furniture, the tapestry hangings, the rugs for the mosaic floor. Samantha could visualize a decidedly feminine woman reclining on the chaise lounge, busy with her embroidery when the day was not warm enough to be seated on the paved area outside. Had her lover or husband sat with her, listening to the pleasant sound of birds, the distant hum of the sea, the cry of gulls, the call of wild life far below on the marsh? Samantha remembered the initials carved in the ancient refectory table, entwined with a heart. Had this charming summer house been built as a present from bridegroom to bride? It was a romantic thought, and somehow appropriate, for when she opened the door the charm of the place struck her anew. It was even intensified, as if joy had banished its air of neglect and disuse—the joy she herself had experienced in those moments when her body had changed from that of a virgin to that of a woman.

The air seemed sweet as she entered the house. Had someone been here before her and opened the windows? Her heart leaped at the thought that it might have been he, looking perhaps for some sign of her, some memento that he could cherish. But that was wishful thinking, speedily dismissed by the thought that perhaps one of Dempster's duties was airing this place.

She looked around her and observed with relief that nothing had been touched. The rose velvet cushions still bore a faint imprint of their bodies and the one her lover had placed beneath her head was still creased. With a sigh she lay down on the chaise and closed her eyes, molding her body into the hollows they had left. It had been true. *True*—not a

dream, but a glorious reality, and she reveled in the memory of it. She wanted more of this delirious sensuality. She wanted to give her body to her secret lover over and over again, to feel their limbs entwined and to feel him taking possession of her as their senses merged in climaxing waves of intoxicating pleasure.

Recollection stirred her blood anew, recalling the touch of flesh against flesh, the caressing fingers between her thighs, his mouth—eager, tender and passionate—then his loving tongue replacing his fingers and sending her senses whirling so that she had cried out to be taken fully and completely . . . and this he had done, sliding into her expertly and carrying her on a tide of passion to the final peak of joy.

Memory was so strong that she felt again the burning desire and the throbbing delight, but unfulfilled longing forced her back to reality. There was danger in such daydreaming. She was cherishing one isolated experience that she might never know again. Her passionate seducer could be miles away by now, and never pass this way again. He could have been a smuggler from another district, directed by secret orders to come to this area on that particular night. Her brother had admitted that no one knew who planned the forays, or who led the individual gangs.

She began to straighten the cushions with a gentle hand, smoothing them and replacing them, the imprints left by two passionate bodies removed forever. It was better so. Tomorrow, she would come to this enchanted summer house and clean it thoroughly, restoring it to its former loveliness and preserving only in her memory those secret, ecstatic moments.

Suddenly, she had the distinct impression that she was being watched, and she spun around. Leaning against the open door was Mark Chaters, arms folded, his pose negligent, his expression amused, as if he had caught her in some guilty act. His gray eyes were almost hazel in the afternoon light, and they regarded her carefully, appraising the possible reasons she might be here, in this summer house. Again, Samantha had the impression that he was hiding some special knowledge. He was not an easy man to fathom.

Above his buckled shoes his muscular calves were clad in white silken hose, and above them fine buckskins emphasized the strength of his thighs. He had worn a spotless neckcloth on returning from Oxney, but this he had removed, leaving

his silk shirt open at the throat and, for greater comfort, the full, flowing sleeves had been unbuttoned and rolled up. His forearms were tanned and his hands were hardened by a lifetime of craftsmanship, bearing testimony to his training as a boatbuilder. Still, he was the consummate gentleman who would always dress well, but discreetly, with no flamboyancy in appearance or manner. She realized that she had yet to see this man wear one item of jewelry.

"So you have discovered my mother's summer house," he commented. "I hope you are charmed by it? She designed it herself, and your Uncle Jonothan had it built for her on the very spot she chose. On a clear day you can see the coast of France. She loved that view. In fact," he finished quietly, "she loved this little place very much indeed."

"I . . . I am not surprised." Samantha looked down at the floor, chagrined to have seemed an intruder in a place that evidently had great meaning for Mark Chaters. If only he knew the meaning it now possessed for her!

"You were inspecting it very thoroughly. Even tidying it, I noticed, though surely it must be a long time since anyone reclined on that couch." His gray eyes seemed to penetrate right into her mind. "Did it look as if someone had been using it?" he asked casually.

"The cushions were slightly crumpled, that was all. No doubt they had been like that for a long time."

"Then I am grateful to you for smoothing them. I once thought I would never be able to enter this little place again, but with you here—" He left the sentence unfinished, but did not turn his eyes away from her. "Please use this summer house as often as you wish, Samantha. It seems the right setting for you. And somehow I think you have a very special feeling for it. Am I correct?"

"Of course I do," she agreed, looking away and walking briskly to the opposite side of the room so that he could not see her face. "It is delightful. I shall take pleasure in restoring it to its original state. The colors in this mosaic floor . . . the tapestries—"

"Embroidered by my mother, as were the other wall hangings. She used to sit here plying her needle while your uncle sat in one of the garden chairs, writing his poetry—a picture of domestic felicity."

The last words were spoken bitterly. Samantha looked at him sharply as she heard his next words. "Had it not been for

the accident, that is." Suddenly she recalled the earlier words he had uttered about his stepfather, delivered in the same harsh tone, "*He had a sense of guilt, and not without cause.*"

Shock ran through Samantha. Ruth Kimbolt had fallen to her death only a short distance from this very spot—over there, across the lawn, through the broken wall. *How?* And did Mark actually blame his stepfather for it? Was that why he had left Hawksmere, young as he was, and never visited the old man again?

A shadow seemed to have crept into the pretty room. Samantha shivered involuntarily. "You are cold?" Mark asked, and took a step toward her. "Perhaps we should shut the door."

There was a new note in his voice. It was husky, imbued with desire. She felt that he was going to touch her, as he had touched her before.

"I must go back indoors," she answered briskly, "Mrs. Thomas should be preparing the evening meal, and I sent her a new recipe to try. She will need my help."

"A few moments will make no difference. Stay where you are—the green of your gown against the soft rose pink of the cushions is a charming combination. Let me look at it for a while. At you, too. It is a long time since a woman adorned this place and I have always had a very special feeling for it. . . . Would you like to know what kind of a feeling?"

"If you wish to tell me."

"I do." He began to walk toward her. "I have always felt that this place was meant for lovers; an arbor for delight. To my mother it was a place for calm relaxation, but to me it has greater potential. A man and a woman could shut this door upon the world and enjoy the ecstasy of love. That couch is made for it—don't you agree?"

She could not speak. She felt the deep color flooding her cheeks and turned away to hide it. He crossed over to her and took hold of her chin, turning her face toward him, looking deeply into her azure eyes. "Have I embarrassed you, Samantha? Surely not. A young woman like you was made for love."

"You mustn't speak so," she gasped, trying to pull away, but feeling drawn to him all the same.

"Why should I not? You are young and lovely, after all, and very desirable. Beneath your charming new dress your body must be even more so. I kissed you and felt the heat of

your response when you first came under my roof—perhaps that was unforgivable, but you were so irresistible. And now you are more so," he continued, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her close. "I know that other parts of your body must be even more beautiful, and I would like to explore them and to claim them. You revel in the delights of love, don't you, Samantha? I am right, aren't I? I would like to strip your lovely body and lay you on this couch and awaken all the passion that lies within you until you cry out again and again for more, until this place fulfilled its promise as a bower of love. Who first seduced you, Samantha? When and where? Was it in a place as intimate as this, or was it with some passionate Frenchman in a shaded forest in Picardy, or at a secret rendezvous away from your aunt's sedate house in London?" He buried his face in her abundant, shimmering hair. "It is not for me to ask, I suppose. The loss of a young woman's virginity is a very special moment for her, isn't it? Very special, very personal, and very private."

He was mocking her, of course. She thrust his hand away before he could venture further. The sound of another man's voice taunting her in this place that she now regarded as solely belonging to her and her lover was more than she could bear. Whirling away from him, she ran from the place and did not stop until she was safe within the abbey.

She knew she had only herself to blame for Mark's attitude. When she had been a virgin, she had encouraged him to believe that she was not; that she was even selective in the lovers she took. Had she convinced him of the truth, he would never have taunted her with her sensuality. But now she was a virgin no longer and he had every right to believe as he did. Still, she hated Mark Chaters for regarding her as a strumpet who could be taken at will. Her physical passion rose far above his estimation of her and her desires. He deserved to have a spoiled and self-indulgent wife who would make marriage a burden instead of a joy, and she hoped very much that Germaine would make life hell for him.

Samantha slept poorly that night, and found it difficult to drag herself from the warm sheets when the sun began its slow ascent the next morning. Nor was she eager for company. However, her curiosity had been aroused about her cousin, and therefore she was not at all disappointed when Patience arrived unexpectedly before lunch. She came riding

into the courtyard on a chestnut mare, her voluminous teal blue riding skirt overflowing the substantial side-saddle. She was a large figure of a woman with pale skin and dark eyes, set under a prominent brow.

But plain as she was, she had a pleasant face that became wreathed in smiles at the sight of Samantha.

"You'd better call a groom to help me down, Cousin Samantha. You must be she, for you look exactly like Aunt Charlotte's miniature of your mother. As you can see, Cousin, I do need assistance, for I am somewhat weighty."

"And I am too thin, Cousin Patience," Samantha laughed, approaching horse and rider. "In my girlhood, Frenchmen hopefully eyed my figure for signs of future development. Curves were appreciated."

"What a pity I didn't live in France!" Patience handed down the reins to the groom who had heard the approach of a horse and had come directly from the stables.

"And what a pity we never met before today."

"Better late than never," Patience observed philosophically, huffing a bit with the exertion of getting off her horse. "I know you were living with Aunt Charlotte. I do sympathize! How I detested her, and how glad I was when she departed! She joined our household when my mother died. Poor Mamma, she had annual miscarriages for the eight years of her married life, then succeeded in producing me and retired vanquished. But I am sure she is a great deal happier now than when on earth. You think this is no way for a clergyman's daughter to talk!" she mused, as Samantha led her to the front doors. "I wouldn't dream of doing so in front of Papa, of course, but you have a frank and honest face that encourages me to be frank and honest, too. Being married to my father could not have been easy. Having met him, you may well comprehend that. And I, alas, am doomed to the life of his dutiful daughter. But I developed my own philosophy years ago—live for the day, intolerable as it may be, and never lose hope for the future. Who knows what it may bring? Frenchmen who appreciate curves, perhaps!"

Samantha laughed. She liked her cousin immensely, and regretted the fact that they had not met sooner.

"I know of one Frenchman who likes you. André Devereaux."

Patience colored and Samantha realized that she had hit a sensitive spot. Her cousin was suddenly silent, and seemed

relieved when Samantha changed the subject and invited Patience to stay and meet the other members of the household. But she was concerned. Remembering Germaine's suspicions of her fellow countryman, she knew it would be a sad thing for her cousin if they proved to be right. The two women walked through the front hall to the morning room.

Once seated in an ample armchair, Patience recovered her composure. "Ostensibly, Cousin Samantha, this is a duty call, at my father's command," she said honestly, "to pay my respects and express a welcome to Mademoiselle de la Roche. For my part, though, I am seizing the opportunity to meet you. Aunt Charlotte, alas, was the only relative I was ever really acquainted with, and I was delighted when she and my father quarreled and she took her departure."

"I knew nothing of any quarrel between them," Samantha said, ringing for Piper.

"That doesn't surprise me. I am quite sure she would never refer to it. Nor, indeed, has Papa. And certainly I have never done so, or it would betray the fact that I tried to eavesdrop. Unsuccessfully, I regret to say. Now you see how dull my life is, since even a crumb of interest about a family quarrel could enliven it. The Kimbolts seem to have been a fractious family, one way and another, don't you agree? I hear your own father's marriage was quite disgraceful."

"To all but he and my mother. They enjoyed it. And so did my brother and I," she added, her eyes shining with the memory.

"I envy you, Samantha. I am sure your life has been a great deal more interesting than mine."

"Apart from my years with Aunt Charlotte, I am inclined to agree with you," Samantha replied, remembering her brief encounter with Uncle Simeon.

André Devereaux had referred to her cousin as 'poor Patience,' and in a way Samantha could understand why. She was plump, plain and evidently lonely, but she had a dry sense of humor that must have fortified her years as the only child of a sanctimonious minister. Conversation with Uncle Simeon could hardly be scintillating.

There was a knock at the door and Piper entered. "Yes, Miss . . . Samantha?" she pronounced carefully.

"Would you be so kind as to tell mademoiselle that she has a visitor? My cousin, Miss Patience Kimbolt, has come to call." Piper nodded and disappeared instantly.

"You must know, of course," Patience continued in a hushed voice, "that the entire district is humming with speculation about mademoiselle." She settled back comfortably, and smoothed the creases from her riding skirt. "No one has yet seen her, except Dr. Devereaux, and all he had to say was that she was charming to look at. That might be prejudice, of course, in favor of his own countrywomen."

There was a note of hope in her voice that Samantha hated to destroy, but she was forced to admit that the girl Mark Chaters was to marry was indeed charming.

"Pretty, would you say?"

"More than pretty," she confessed half-heartedly.

Patience looked disconsolate. "I thought as much. So many of them seem to be. Either petite and enchanting, or striking and elegant. Which is she?"

"Petite and enchanting."

"That is an understatement," said Richard from the door. "She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. You are Cousin Patience, are you not? I know you by sight, of course." He strolled across the room to her side in his indolent, elegant fashion and took her hand. He looked quite dashing this morning in his tight buckskin breeches and fawn-colored coat with black trim.

"And I you, but you have a shocking reputation, so I dare not acknowledge you when we pass in the streets of Rye, much as I want to."

Dick threw back his head and laughed.

"But now that both your father and yourself have formally called, greetings between us are permissible, I presume?" He smiled down at her. "Welcome, Patience, for my sister's sake. Samantha knows no one in these parts, except the lovely Germaine who promises to be so cocooned in Mark's love that she will have little time for any woman. And, alas," he finished reflectively, "for any man."

"My goodness, she must be lovely," Patience said with a raised eyebrow. "I can see you are quite taken with her, Cousin."

"And much good will it do me—the wife of another man, and that man my employer, to boot. That doesn't stop me from appreciating her, of course," he pointed out, accentuating his words with a slap of his hand on his thigh.

"It is well known that you appreciate a pretty face."

"Local gossip, I suppose, but I don't deny it." He caught

his sister's eye and grinned wickedly. "Don't worry, Samantha, I will try to make no advances in any forbidden direction."

"You had better not," Patience observed. "You do know, of course, that the local gossip is also keen on Cousin Samantha. I declare, my dear," she said, turning in her seat, "that people are almost as curious about you as they are about Mademoiselle de la Roche. I have been curious myself, but when I asked Papa which of your parents you resembled, he said he had failed to notice."

Richard laughed aloud. "He noticed well enough, and disapproved. Sam looks like Mother, of course."

"And both lovely." Patience sighed. "I should have known you would outshine me, Samantha, and I do wish I could dislike you, because then I need not bother to see you again. I could just pay my respects occasionally to mademoiselle, as Papa ordered, and feel my duty discharged. But now that I've met you, I do want to know you!" She finished with a warm and spontaneous smile that quite transformed her homely face.

"And I, you! But let us have no more talk about outshining anyone, because that is nonsense," Samantha insisted, rising and crossing the room to stand beside her cousin's chair. "Some of the most beautiful women in the world have been painfully dull, so be glad of your lively personality and the fact that people must like you a very great deal."

Patience shrugged philosophically. "Oh yes. I know they do—the women of the church sewing circle, and all the local mothers who regard me as no rival for their daughters. Although perhaps I might have a slim chance were I to wear a dress such as yours."

She eyed Samantha's morning gown with envy. "Did I say slim! I would look as big and round as a Bramley apple—indeed; a whole sack of them—in that dress!" Her good-humored face beamed, and Samantha felt inclined to tell her that when she looked like that, no man would have eyes for her figure, but it was difficult to be so frank with someone she had just met.

"Did you buy that in London or Paris?" Patience asked.

"Neither. In Hythe. There is an excellent modiste there."

"Victoria Turner? Alas, Papa forbids me to go to her, not merely because she is expensive, but because . . . well . . . her reputation."

"Which is excellent, I hear."

"As a dressmaker, yes. But I wasn't meaning that." Patience leaned forward confidentially. "Perhaps I should not refer to it, right here in this house, but the way Uncle Jonathan took her under his wing, and her daughter into his home . . . well . . . the conclusion was obvious. And of course, Papa said that Uncle Jon did at least do the right thing by both of them and that was the most Christian way of looking at it."

Dick burst out, "Hell's teeth, what are you implying? That Victoria Turner was Uncle Jon's fancy piece and Alice his bastard?"

Patience looked somewhat shocked at her cousin's language. "Well, such things happen, don't they? Even in the best regulated families."

"But Uncle Jon was devoted to Ruth, his wife!"

"How do you know?"

"By the way he used to talk about her, the way he grieved for her. Why do you think he hit the bottle so hard? That didn't happen until after her death, old Thomas told me." Dick sat on a stool beside the fireplace and drew Samantha down to sit at his feet.

"I was unaware that he drank at all," Patience shrugged. "I suppose that was the reason why Papa never invited him to the vicarage nor brought me to visit him. Papa is chairman of the Total Abstiners' League."

"He *would* be! Sorry, Cousin, but self righteousness always puts me off. We weren't brought up to it, Samantha and I." He placed his hands lightly on his sister's shoulders and she leaned back comfortably, against him, thoroughly engrossed in the conversation.

"I have been, unfortunately, but that doesn't mean I enjoy it." Patience's round, kindly face tried to assume a look of penitence, and failed. "You will think me cowardly and hypocritical, to be sure, but I pay lip service to Papa's beliefs, and keep my own strictly secret." She shrugged her ample shoulders. "What else can I do? I have to live with him." She shook her finger in Dick's face. "And I know why you are regarding me in that questioning way, Cousin Richard—you are wondering what my secret beliefs actually are. Isn't that so?"

He acknowledged, with an amused smile, that it would indeed be interesting to know.

"Perhaps you will learn in time," she answered airily. "Perhaps not. Sometimes it takes quite a time for people to

learn about things. Imagine, all these years I have known nothing about poor Uncle Jonothan's affliction, though my dear papa would not call it that." She folded her hands before her, primly.

"Then if you never heard about it," Dick insisted, "the local gossips were either unexpectedly charitable or too busy looking for worse scandal—such as the wife of his late butler being his mistress. If you or your father had ever cared for the poor old devil, you would have known what a tragic wreck grief turned him into."

Grief—or remorse? Again Samantha recalled Mark's implication of his stepfather's guilt and his bequest of Hawksmere as an act of atonement. Atonement for what? But now, she was equally curious about the Turners.

"What is this about Mrs. Turner's husband being Uncle Jon's late butler?" she asked, placing her elbows on her knees and leaning her head on her hands.

"Precisely that, Sam," Dick answered. "He was gone long before I came to Hawskmere, so I never knew him, but of course I heard about him in the kitchen—and from Alice, too. Turner was drowned in the great dike down on the marsh very shortly after Uncle Jon's wife was killed. I told you about that, didn't I?"

Samantha nodded.

"She loved the view out across the marsh, toward the sea," Dick went on, "and presumably she paused to admire it. She must have leaned against the wall at the top of the cliffs—" His eyes flickered to Samantha and away again, regretting this reminder that he himself had been busy at the very spot only a couple of nights ago. He gave a deep sigh, evidently upset by recounting some gruesome details. But still, he went on: "As for Turner's death, well, the Romney Marsh is riddled with dikes, and deaths such as his aren't uncommon. One false step can lead the unwary into unseen waters, though Thomas has always said that Turner knew the marsh like the back of his hand, and used to spend most of his free time walking there. No one knew he had a wife and child to support. Turner was apparently a very reserved man, not given to confidences. It was a surprise to everyone when Victoria turned up at the abbey with her small daughter claiming to be his widow."

"Is that what happened?" Samantha interjected. "How strange! Surely she could have lived with him here? A

married butler is always given married quarters, and his wife employed in some position of authority in the household. At least, that's the way I always understood it."

"Can you imagine Victoria Turner in service?" Dick scoffed. "Anyway, Hawksmere already had a housekeeper. I gather Martha Piper inherited the position in the usual way, working her way up from kitchen maid."

"Even so," Patience put in, "Turner's wife could have supervised the household linen and that sort of thing, being such a skilled needlewoman. She could have kept aloof from the domestic staff, had she wanted to."

Samantha agreed. "And she doesn't seem averse to her own daughter being in domestic service, for which I can't say I admire her."

"Aunt Charlotte didn't admire her, either," Patience said.

"I didn't realize Charlotte had ever met her," Dick exclaimed.

Patience nodded.

"That was when she was living with us at the rectory," Patience nodded, remembering back. "She was there the very day that Mrs. Turner called upon Papa, asking for help. Alice was with her. She was such a quiet little thing! I kept her amused cutting up paper dolls while her mother was with Papa in his study. I don't suppose Alice remembers—she's so grown up now, isn't she?"

Richard frowned. "What's all this about her mother calling on your father? I understood she arrived unexpectedly on the steps of Hawksmere, after Turner was drowned, to claim protection."

"All I remember is," Patience squinted and pinched the bridge of her nose with a plump hand as if to call up the memory, "that Mrs. Turner called at the rectory, asking to speak with the rector of the parish. Of course, that's quite usual. A parish priest is mentor, adviser, rescuer of souls and everything else. Anyone in distress can knock at his door. Aunt Charlotte admitted her. I recall quite clearly now," she laughed, "although I was only thirteen at the time, how our sainted aunt looked down her aristocratic nose at the woman, because she didn't look in any kind of need, or impoverished at all. She was very well dressed and very good looking, with that raven hair and the proud way she held her head. Poor little Alice clung to her hand, red-eyed, as if she had been crying a lot. Mrs. Turner said she would appreciate an

interview with the rector, and when Papa had said she was to be shown into the study, Aunt Charlotte sniffed in disapproval."

"I can imagine!" Samantha remarked, eloquently, her face eager and interested. "What then?"

"Then Aunt Charlotte said, '*She* is in no need. Not a woman like that!' But apparently she was, because shortly after, Papa came out of his study with her, looking grave. She had a letter in her hand and he was telling her to take it at once to his brother at Hawksmere. 'He will do as I ask him.' Papa seemed very angry then, and after they had gone he announced that she was the estranged widow of the butler at Hawksmere, and he had taken steps to ensure that his brother would do the right thing by both her and the child. And for the life of me I could not understand why Aunt Charlotte and Papa had such a terrible quarrel later, when they thought I was in bed, asleep. The next day, Aunt Charlotte packed her trunks and departed, and never came back."

Patience paused for breath, then looked at her cousins guiltily. "I am talking too much, aren't I? I have vexed you, have I not, Cousin Richard? You think I am spreading tittle-tattle, but everything I have said is true. All the same, I am sorry. It was not my intention to anger you," she said, raising a hand in protest.

"Well I'm afraid you succeeded," he said a trifle huffily, rising and crossing to look out the window. "I was fond of Uncle Jon. He was good to me, which is more than can be said of other members of the Kimbolt family." At the sight of Patience's crestfallen face he put out a hand and went over to her plump arm. "There, there. I didn't mean to upset you, Cousin, but by Gemini—" with a typical transition of mood, he burst out laughing, "—if such a wild story were true, that Alice-in-the-kitchen really were Uncle Jon's by-blow, it would mean she is kin to us all!" He smiled as he thought of ramifications of having an affair with a cousin.

"Illegitimately, yes," Patience nodded.

Richard's amusement was replaced by a scowl. "I won't accept it," he said, shaking his head rigorously, "that she is any relation, I mean. Legitimately or illegitimately."

Samantha understood. The idea of carrying on an intimate relationship with Alice, in such circumstances, took the gilt off the affair.

Standing up and smoothing her dress, Samantha said decisively, "None of us must ever refer to this matter again,

nor even think about it. The past is past, and does not belong to us anyway." But Patience was not listening. She was staring at the door, her eyes round, and then she was struggling to rise out of the armchair. She was barely able to produce a clumsy curtsy—it threatened to topple her over. All her ease had flown when Germaine entered the room.

Germaine was wearing a pseudo-pastoral gown derived from the example of Marie Antoinette at the Trianon, but obviously it was costly for all its simplicity. It was a vision in lavender foulard trimmed with ribbons of a deeper tone, the coloring setting off her dark hair and pale skin to perfection. No petulance touched her mouth. It curved sweetly into a smile instead.

"*Ma chère Patience*," she bubbled effusively, going to her. "How delightful it is to have company! Please, you will pardon my English. It is, how you say?—abominable. I know few words now. My dear Mark, he teach me, but alas, he leave today for Folkestone. So soon after I arrive, he desert me. . . ."

"I am so happy to meet you at last," Patience stammered, looking most unsure of herself. She eased herself back into her seat.

Samantha noted that Germaine's English had become considerably worse for the benefit of her company. "He does have his boatyard to look after," she pointed out.

"But for many weeks, he wait to look after *me*!" Germaine pouted, lapsing into her native tongue to berate Mark. Samantha's irritation was aroused, and she was forced to suppress it.

"And now that I am here," Germaine continued, flouncing into the chair by the fire, "he goes away! And yet he declare that he love me!"

"Of which he shows plenty of evidence," Samantha remarked drily, remembering how well he played the role of devoted lover. Nor was it play acting, she was sure. The only insincerity of which the man was guilty was in pursuing another woman behind his fiancée's back. A despicable man. The French girl was welcome to him. Again, as she glanced over at Dick, she noticed the lovesick expression on his face, and this further infuriated her.

Germaine answered grudgingly, "I admit it was thoughtful of him to engage you in order to preserve my good name. He insists that your presence here as chaperone is useful, preserving the proprieties."

Does he, indeed, Samantha fumed, walking to the opposite side of the room, as far away from Germaine as she could get. And under cover of that, he would seduce me if he could! Aloud, she answered calmly, "There would certainly have been many raised eyebrows had he lived here alone with you prior to marriage. These are country parts, not Paris or London, and the people here have country ways."

"Country ways are the ways of animals—mating under the hedgerows," the French girl answered contemptuously, tossing her curls. "Morals are the same in every strata of society, the only difference being that some indulge them in greater luxury than others."

"For a gently nurtured French girl, your knowledge of the world is surprising," Samantha replied a trifle caustically. This only served to amuse Germaine who, with a soft little trill of laughter, answered, "My dear Samantha, you forget I was acquainted with the French Court."

"I had no knowledge that you ever were. I thought you came from a sheltered existence in an aristocratic chateau on the Loire."

"And so I did, but naturally I was presented at Versailles when the time came." She spread her lavender skirts about her with an instinctive eye for the most effective pose. She looked like a diminutive doll, waiting to be picked up and petted. Beside her, Patience seemed so awkward—gauche and clumsy and acutely conscious of it. She was anxious to be gone, but courtesy demanded that she should not leave so soon, even though her hostess seemed to have no further remarks to address to her.

Germaine lifted her eyes in helpless appeal to Samantha's brother. "Richard," she begged, "will *you* keep me company in Mark's absence? Fond as I already am of your sister, I am accustomed to male companionship."

"My dear mademoiselle," he said hastily, "it will be an honor and a pleasure."

Samantha shot him a warning glance. "But Dick," she said in a cool voice, "surely your leisure hours will coincide with Mark's."

The dimpled smile disappeared; Germaine's velvet brown eyes assumed a look of guilt. "I do believe your sister disapproves of my suggestion. Why, Samantha? I thought we were all to be friends."

"And so we are. But, like Mark, my brother also has work to attend to. I fear you will have to rely on me for company

when their duties occupy them. I will do my best to amuse you." She sat in a high-backed chair beside the writing desk and picked up a quill pen, only to occupy her hands in some way. She felt extremely uncomfortable.

"In what way?" Germaine asked suspiciously.

"We can explore the countryside together."

"On foot? I know you English have a penchant for country walks, but do not expect me to participate, I beg."

"Then we will ride," Samantha went on in a firm tone. "I am sure you were accustomed to riding in the Val de Loire."

Germaine glanced at Samantha, rose abruptly and flounced across to the tall window overlooking the marsh. It was clear today, spreading like a vast carpet toward the distant sea. She shuddered as she gazed at the view.

"Desolate! Absolutely *desolate*! How can anyone bear to live near such flat and endless land? Does no one realize its dangers?"

"Dangers? You mean the dikes?" Dick asked. "Once you are familiar with the marsh, you will know where each body of water lies, and so avoid them."

She whirled around.

"I don't mean *that*! I mean the danger of invasion."

He dismissed the idea with a shrug. "If France intended to declare war on England, she would have done so long ago. This talk of war between our two countries has gone on for years."

"And one day it will cease to be merely talk! There is a man you English should heed, a general named Bonaparte. Only a general, you think?" She looked at them all contemptuously. "You English! You never wake up to danger until it is on your doorstep. He will conquer the world!"

"And was France so wise when the revolution came?" Samantha demanded angrily. "It caught everyone unprepared."

Mark's voice cut across the room. "That is enough! I will have no more talk of this kind in Germaine's presence. She is here to recover, not to be reminded of past suffering."

He came striding across the room, his anger leveled upon Samantha, his expression reminding her pointedly that she had been employed to keep Germaine happy, and at this moment was failing. She remained silent and turned her gaze to the floor. One word, and she might reveal how she felt about his adored Germaine.

At that moment, fortunately, he saw Patience, and his

manner changed. "My dear Miss Kimbolt," he said, with great civility, "what a pleasant surprise. I do hope you are in good health—and your father as well?"

Patience blushed, obviously uneasy at being the center of attention. "Indeed, Mr. Chaters," she murmured in a low voice. "I am well, as is the Reverend. Thank you for inquiring." She stood and made her way to the door.

"Not leaving so soon, are you?" Mark asked, frowning once again at Samantha as if this were her fault.

"I must go in order to prepare Papa's luncheon."

He reached back and turned the doorknob. "In that case, may I extend the invitation to visit Hawksmere soon again, and as often as possible."

If she did return, thought Samantha, it would not be to see Germaine, with her temperamental outbursts and condescending manner.

Patience took her departure and Samantha went with her to the stable, equally glad to get away. She was well aware that before Mark returned to Folkestone he would speak his mind to her, so the sooner she faced up to it the better. She therefore made a point of not lingering in the courtyard, as Thomas helped Patience to remount. The friendly girl looked down at Samantha from the saddle with a rueful smile and a slight grimace, indicating that she sympathized with her cousin. When Thomas stood aside, she turned her mount so that her back was to the old man. Leaning down, she said confidentially to Samantha, "She is lovely, but I envy you not in the least, my friend. If Mark Chaters is wise, he will wed her quickly and bring her to heel." With that, she waved her crop in farewell and departed.

Chapter 12



When Samantha returned to the morning room, Germaine was laughing vivaciously with Richard, almost flirting with him. Could this lively creature really be as fatigued as she would have Mark believe, Samantha wondered. She never seemed to mention her impending marriage, although she appeared to want Mark's attention, his company and his devotion. Yet, she could divert herself with Dick as though she were not engaged to marry another.

Samantha tried not to dwell on the thought of Mark marrying Germaine, nor of them lying together in the nuptial bed. For some reason, it upset her to think of a man—any man—being led about by a silly little minx. But she, as she sternly reminded herself, was not employed to think such thoughts. The next day, as she had offered, she added another chore to her household duties. She set out with Germaine for their first ride together.

Samantha realized at once that the French girl was a far more expert horsewoman than herself. So much was demonstrated by the way she settled in the saddle and held the reins. While Samantha fumbled with her reins, trying to recall those long-ago lessons with her father, Germaine was already

trotting out of the courtyard with the new groom Mark had engaged for her. Although Germaine had alternated between interest and indifference all morning, the afternoon sunshine and the clean air had finally lured her outdoors.

As they passed the grazing fields, Samantha saw the flock of sheep Mark had purchased, and the shepherd he had just hired to replace Jake Dempster. The man was talking to Richard, pointing to individual sheep, as if indicating their merits. She was glad to see that Dick was paying attention, despite the fact that he still protested that farming held little appeal for him. He had inherited all their father's restlessness, that was certain. Samantha worried about Dick. What would eventually happen to this charming, scapegrace brother who had fallen into an easy-come, easy-go way of life when so young? And what of the girl who loved him, passionate Alice, whom Samantha had espied, more than once, lingering disconsolately in the corridor outside Richard's room? It was plain enough that he was tiring of her, and becoming ever more besotted with Germaine.

Samantha was jolted sharply from her reverie when she saw Jake Dempster leaning upon a stile, watching the man who had taken his job. He was watching her brother, too.

Dempster turned as she approached, doffing his tricorne with characteristic boldness mixed with a forced display of good manners.

"Good day to ye, Miss Kimbolt."

"Good day," she answered politely. To her surprise and annoyance, he left the stile and planted himself in her path, forcing her to rein in her horse.

"There be great goings on at the abbey, I see," he said leisurely, as if it didn't really concern him. "The new master works quickly. New shearing sheds going up, new barns too, not to mention a fine new flock of sheep. Better than that lot I had the ill luck to tend. What happened to 'em, I wonder. . . ."

"They went to market, of course." That seemed evident, but she responded anyway. There was a certain implacability about this attractive but coarse man that commanded a reply.

She turned her horse and rode on, wondering why Dempster was hanging around the fields when he was no longer employed at Hawksmere. As she followed Germaine and the groom downhill to the marsh, however, she soon forgot him. A wind blew in from the sea, bending the tall elms and the willows edging the marsh. It was as if they had descended into

another world—a fascinating, haunting world that would be sinister when darkness fell. And yet, even at night, the marsh could have a certain beauty. She had seen it from her window, shimmering intermittently as drifting clouds unveiled the moon and then obscured it again. She had seen the night sky reflected in myriad channels of water, and tall poplars standing like graceful sentinels watching over a still and silent world—silent except for the occasional cry of a nightjar or an owl. But she had also seen flickering lights operated by unseen hands, and answering lights from far out upon the water—Dutch ships, perhaps, waiting with valuable cargoes of tea and brandy, or vessels from Jersey or Guernsey bringing contraband for their vast storehouses.

At such moments she would heed her brother's warnings and draw her curtains, not wanting to know about events outside. Dick had informed her, in a choked voice, of bodies found washed ashore, of men disappearing without warning. The smugglers were becoming more desperate and more dangerous, providing an atmosphere of menace in the quiet community. She was thankful that since that one fateful night, no illegal activities had taken place at Hawksmere. Yet, in a perverse sense, even knowing the danger, she was disappointed because they might have brought her lover back to her. Nothing would have stopped her then from going to the summer house, spurred by the hope that he would come.

Never in her life had Samantha lived so close to danger of the kind for which the Romney marsh was notorious, and yet there was another face to this wild area, and she saw it now as she rode along. It was placid, calm, serene, a place where sheep grazed contentedly and wildlife flourished. She saw ducks nestling within the shadow of reeds, and the startled flight of heron, the sudden rush of wild swans flying in formation overhead, their long necks outthrust and their heavy wings thrashing the air as they cleaved a path through it. Samantha caught her breath, halted and watched them until they disappeared from sight.

"Beautiful, are they not, Miss Kimbolt? Free and unafraid."

Startled, she turned and saw André Devereaux seated astride his horse a few yards away. Germaine was riding ahead with the groom, apparently unaware that Samantha had reined; she was skirting one of the great dikes. Samantha knew from Richard's description how deep and treacherous it was in places, and she wondered now whether the new groom

was aware of this. Perhaps he was, and yet he had been compelled to indulge his pretty mistress's whim to ride where she chose.

Her mind so occupied, she acknowledged the Frenchman's remark politely, but absently, and spurred after the others. As she caught up with Germaine, she realized that her alarm had been unnecessary. The ground was firm beneath the horses' hooves and the water reasonably shallow. Even so she considered they had ridden far enough.

"For your first day out," she said to Germaine, "you have ridden quite a distance. Shall we return to Hawksmere now?"

"There is a bridge spanning the dike a few yards back," said Devereaux, who had quickened his horse's pace so that he was now behind her. "You can follow the cliff rise from the other side and approach the abbey that way. It is a shortcut. Let me show you."

Germaine whirled around, unaware that he had followed. Samantha saw surprise and annoyance in the French girl's eyes.

"You will soon be home, mademoiselle," the doctor said, pointing upward to the towering edifice of Hawksmere standing high above.

"Home?" Germaine whispered with an indrawn breath. "Only one place is home to me. Hawksmere will never be that." She shivered slightly, Samantha noticed.

If Devereaux heard, he gave no indication, and Samantha thought it wise not to do so either. She rode quietly beside Germaine, and when they reached the bridge, Devereaux halted, removed his hat, and said good bye.

"The zig-zag track on the other side climbs to the top of the cliff, and then straight on to Hawksmere. Good day to you, mademoiselle. I am glad to see you out and about."

"On your advice, m'sieur."

He reacted sharply to the tartness in her voice. "I will not disturb you further," he said. Samantha reflected that if indeed Germaine thought it wise to encourage this man, of whom she entertained such grave doubts, she was going about it the wrong way; but Germaine seemed unable to hide her feelings at any time, with any person.

Anxious to terminate the meeting, Samantha rode ahead, dismounted, and led her horse across the bridge. The structure vibrated slightly, but she crossed without mishap and waited on the other side for Germaine to follow. Without bothering to dismount, the French girl whirled away from the

doctor and lunged at the wooden bridge. Samantha saw it rock perilously and called out in warning.

Germaine screamed pitiously as she toppled from the saddle. But Devereaux was quicker than the groom to reach her side, and he caught her as she fell. Before the bridge collapsed, he had her safely across, but her horse was thrashing water. Terrified cries issued from the animal's throat. The groom went scrambling down from the other side of the dike, and grabbed the horse's martingale to haul it up, though in so doing he was almost pulled into the water himself. As soon as Devereaux had Germaine safely on the ground, he left her there sobbing, while he hurried back to help.

The two men at last were able to haul the horse up the opposite bank, the groom pulling and Devereaux, soaked to his chest, pushing the poor beast from behind. He then came scrambling back to the women, only to be faced by a raging Germaine. She beat upon him with her tiny fists, sobbing out a torrent of abuse.

"You are uninjured, mademoiselle, so cease your hysterics," he said peremptorily, taking hold of her shoulders and shaking her hard. Her head rocked back and forth like a puppet's. Astonished, she stared at him open-mouthed.

"I might have been killed!"

"But you were not."

"*You* would have liked me to be!" she insisted, stamping her foot. "*You* sent me to that bridge!"

"I did not tell you to take it at the gallop. Had you watched Miss Kimbolt, you would have seen her dismount and walk her horse across. And I would like to hear one good reason why I should wish you to be killed."

"Because I am an *aristo*, and you are not," she hissed.

"*Mon Dieu*," he exclaimed, looking to Samantha for confirmation of his anger. "I have never pretended to be anything but what I am," he answered. Although it was clear he did not wish to be anywhere near Germaine, he picked her up and set her on Samantha's horse. On the opposite bank, the groom was still soothing Germaine's mouth, trying to calm him. Devereaux called across and asked the man to lead the horse back to Hawksmere. Samantha then followed on foot as Devereaux walked on his own horse and Germaine up the rising ground ahead.

And in this way, silently, they returned to Hawksmere, to find Mark awaiting them.

Germaine flung herself into his arms, totally distraught, and poured out an incoherent story. The doctor stood beside Samantha, wringing water out of his soaking coat.

"My darling," Mark murmured soothingly. "You are evidently in shock. Naturally you would be agitated after such an experience." He then turned to Devereaux and asked for his account of the story, whereupon Samantha led Germaine to the stairs. They were nearly at the top when the doctor finished describing the mishap. Samantha could see that Germaine was none too pleased when Mark thanked Devereaux for his presence of mind and insisted on his remaining for a change of apparel and a meal.

"We are near enough in size, I think, m'sieu," they heard him say, "though perhaps you are closer to Richard's than mine. Between us, we can meet your needs."

Germaine was furious, and gave vent to her anger without a thought of being overheard. "Mark cannot be inviting that man to stay!"

"He must, until the groom returns with his horse, and he has had the opportunity to bathe and change his clothes." Samantha found it difficult to speak patiently.

"If that upstart of a doctor is to sup here," the French girl declared, stalking to her bedroom door, "I will take a meal in my room, that I vow!"

"Do so, by all means," Samantha offered in a cool tone, standing a few steps behind Germaine, who could not see the expression on Samantha's face. "I will have a mite of chicken in tarragon sauce sent up to you. I am sure that after such intense physical suffering you will be unable to tackle anything more solid. Or a little calf's foot jelly, perhaps, for your delicate constitution?"

Germaine whirled around and looked at her sharply, but Samantha's now innocent glance conveyed nothing but sympathy.

Opening the door of Germaine's room, she added, "On the other hand, it seems a pity for you to miss an opportunity to study the doctor closely. I thought you intended to encourage his visits for that very reason. Remember your suspicions of him, ma'mselle."

Germaine was silent for a moment and squinted her eyes, which did nothing to diminish Samantha's irritation. Then Germaine rallied. "For the sake of my dear Mark, I will put a brave front on things and tolerate Devereaux's company—

not to mention bearing my own discomfort. My head aches appallingly and I vow every muscle in my body is bruised.

"Despite the fact that you did not even suffer a bump? The doctor caught you in time."

"Sometimes, dear Samantha, I think I do not like you very much. Or perhaps you do not like me?"

Samantha bit back the words she was dying to utter. Instead, she rang for water for Germaine's hip bath, cunningly concealed in a curtained alcove and, while waiting for it to arrive, she helped her to undress. As she did so she reflected that Alice Turner had not been far wrong in asking if she had come to Hawksmere to be mademoiselle's personal maid. Only after Germaine was at last resting on her bed was Samantha able to escape and attend to herself. There was no time for her to enjoy a leisurely bath; she had to wash her body from the bowl on the marble-topped washstand, and the water that came up from the kitchen proved to be no more than tepid, the hottest having been spared for poor little mademoiselle.

Despite this, Samantha felt refreshed and ready to step into her dinner gown of amber taffeta, another of the luxurious creations from Victoria Turner's ready-made stock. For a brief moment she held it against her, pleased with the way it caught the reflections of her blond hair. And at that precise moment Germaine's bell jangled.

Samantha dropped the gown, pulled on a robe, and reluctantly answered.

The girl was herself again. Curled in the middle of the great bed she yawned, stretched, and purred cunningly. "What shall I wear? Open the closet, Samantha, so I may choose."

Biting back a retort, Samantha flung the door wide, marveling again at Germaine's good fortune in escaping from France with such an extraordinary wardrobe—thanks to Mark. Samantha took out a sapphire-blue velvet gown and held it up, but this was dismissed with a wave of Germaine's delicate hand. Satins, laces, silks, and *mousseline de soie* all met with the same lack of enthusiasm; they were no more than familiar objects of which the spoiled girl had grown tired.

At last, with a shrug, Germaine agreed that a black velvet gown with low cut shoulders would surely be highly becoming. "But it needs jewels, and alas, I was robbed of those when the chateau was plundered. The few I now possess

include nothing suitable to wear tonight." She sulked as she stepped into the gown and allowed Samantha to fasten the endless hooks and eyes. As she completed the last one, the big gong that Piper wielded to summon the household to meals, reverberated throughout the abbey.

Germaine cast a critical glance at her reflection in a vast, gilt-framed wall mirror, turning her head this way and that. "Oh, for a good French *coiffeuse*!" she cried, scattering hairpins with impatient fingers. "You will try to dress my hair, Samantha, will you not?"

"I am not a lady's maid," Samantha flung back angrily, "so do the best you can, mademoiselle, as I do with mine. Now I must dress."

Samantha marched back to her room and made every effort to ignore the jangling of Germaine's bell. How dare that willful child to treat me so, she fumed, piling her own gleaming hair on top of her head and securing it with pins. For how long would she be expected to look on Mark's indulgence of her whims, and why should she even care that he doted upon the silly creature? It was high time to forget those moments in the library, the strength of his arms about her and his fierce demanding kisses. She knew the memory should stir her to outrage, although she could not help but wish that her unseen, midnight lover could have been Mark. Of course, the man was more likely to have been bold-eyed Dempster.

Her thoughts wheeled around sharply. Why should he not have been Mark? Dick had said that there was only one thing about a leader that everyone could be sure of—that he would be rich, and prominent in the country, protected by a respectable profession or business. Mark was all those things. And he built sloops and luggers capable of outstripping the fastest revenue cutter; opportunites for illicit trading were at his fingertips.

Startled by the thought, Samantha's hands paused in their task of fastening the endless rows of buttons at the back of her gown. Her mind was racing, and so was her blood.

Mark *could* have been out there in the darkness on that fateful night, not participating in the gang's labors but supervising, watching . . . and capturing an unwitting intruder. Such a wild possibility seemed improbable, but not impossible.

Then she recalled that her unseen lover had worn a ring—a broad and heavy ring like the one on Dempster's hand—and she had never yet seen Mark display a single item of jewelry.

Her hope died, and with it the wild surge of her blood. Vexed for giving way to such an outlandish idea, she reminded herself that Mark Chaters was a ruthless man who went after what he wanted in life, whether it be a legacy he did not deserve or a woman he did not love. He was no more than an unscrupulous, selfish bounder who deserved to be hoodwinked by spoiled little Germaine.

Without prior warning, the dividing door was flung open and Germaine stood there, wide-eyed and penitent. Her hair was piled haphazardly on top of her head, like that of a child playing at being grown up. She looked adorable, and seemed even more so when she ran across the room and flung her arms around Samantha's neck. It was impossible not to respond to such genuine impulsiveness, and Samantha returned the embrace with good-natured affection. The French girl was so mercurial, it was hard to take her anger seriously.

"Oh, *c'est affreux! Ma chère Samantha*," she cried, tears creeping down her rosy cheeks. "I am sometimes so bad, so cruel. You will forgive me, yes?"

"I . . . of course, certainly," Samantha agreed, wiping away two drops from Germaine's lustrous eyes.

Promptly, Germaine laughed and pulled away, and there was a resounding tear as the bodice of Samantha's amber taffeta gown ripped from neck to waist.

Germaine stared aghast at what she had just done, the scissors falling from her hand with a clatter.

"Oh, Samantha, *je vous en prie!* How terrible. I forgot I had then, truly I did! I struggled to do my own hair and . . . see?" she reached up and grabbed a handful, "all these strands refused to be tucked away, so I thought the only solution was to ask you to cut them off. So . . . I brought the scissors. I had to because when I rang again you took no notice. If only you had answered, this would never have happened, so you cannot really blame me, can you?"

Shaking, Samantha stared at the girl and then at her dress. Never again would she trust that convincing façade of innocence and naïveté. From now on, she would be on her guard.

Without a word, Samantha changed into her afternoon dress.

Throughout dinner, she found she was unable to join in the conversation because of the lump in her throat. Would anyone believe her if she revealed what Germaine had done to her?

Sympathetically, Germaine covered up for her silence, chattering with animation and drawing all attention to herself. When spoken to, Samantha made monosyllabic answers, kept her eyes on her plate for the most part, but was scarcely aware of the food she ate. The delicious trout à la Genèvoise, cooked in champagne and Moselle, followed by a fricandeau of beef, served in sorrel sauce, and a very fine Duke of Cumberland's pudding, the whole washed down with the best wines left in Uncle Jonothan's cellar, satisfied even Germaine's critical French palate. But Samantha could not taste a thing.

Every now and then snatches of conversation penetrated Samantha's haze: Richard, talking about the new shepherd, Mark, saying he had to go across to Calais tomorrow, Germaine, expressing her disappointment that he was leaving so soon again, but not letting it overcome good manners. She even went so far as to express her appreciation of Dr. Devereaux's presence of mind that afternoon and begged his forgiveness for her outrageous behavior. "I was frightened, shocked—you understand, m'sieu?" And, of course, he did understand. Everyone, always, would understand and forgive Germaine's behavior—except Samantha, who was now convinced that she understood it better than most.

Devereaux was saying, "Your accusation was correct, in any case, mademoiselle."

"My accusation? What was that, *m'sieu' la Docteur*?"

"That I am not, and never have been, an aristocrat. But, as I told you, I have never pretended to be. It was my wife who was well born—the daughter of the Duc du Clermont, one of the most noble of French families."

"And you lost her?" Germaine whispered with a catch in her voice.

"She died in the Temple."

Samantha's head jerked up in horror. The Temple, in which Louis XVI was incarcerated with Marie Antoinette and their children, was not a fortress from which anyone escaped.

"And your son?" she managed to ask.

"I managed to get him as far as Le Havre. It was my wife's wish, but mercifully she never knew that I failed. The boy was shot as we were about to board a vessel for England, along with a dozen others, old and young."

"Someone betrayed you?" Richard asked in a hushed voice.

"Someone betrayed the English vessel. It sometimes happens." The doctor lapsed into silence and stared down at his plate, although Germaine seemed unaware of his mood. "Take comfort, *m'sieur le Docteur*," she said with deliberate brightness, "You, at least, managed to reach safety."

He lifted his head and looked at her, his expression inscrutable. "I had no desire to, mademoiselle. I was forced to."

"Forced? How, pray?"

"Some of the wounded fell on the ship's deck. I was the only doctor available. I could not abandon them." His color had paled as he spoke.

"So you sailed without your son, leaving him dead!" Germaine sounded shocked at this possible parental neglect.

"No, I picked up his body and took it with me. He was buried at sea—out there—between England and France. The ship ran the gauntlet of the National Guard's guns, and escaped. I was put off at Folkestone along with the rest, and eventually obtained transport to Rye, where fate has been kind. These days, as the blade crashes down and heads drop into waiting baskets, one can consider oneself fortunate indeed to be in England."

After that, the troubles Samantha had known seemed so paltry that she felt ashamed.

Throughout the conversation, Mark had remained silent, his eyes on Germaine's white face. Samantha guessed that he was concerned about the effect this story might have on her, recalling her parents' end on the guillotine. She was therefore not surprised when he insisted upon his betrothed going to bed early.

Germaine obeyed without demur and scarcely spoke as Samantha helped her to undress. Neither referred to the ruined gown, but when Samantha bade her good night and turned to the door, Germaine snuffed her bedside candle and said in the darkness, in a voice so cool that a chill ran through Samantha, "The doctor's story is pitiable, of course, but he must miss his wife's money."

"I hardly think that matters to him!" Samantha retorted, her hard feelings about the French girl surfacing once more.

"But it makes him vulnerable, do you not see?"

"Vulnerable? In what way?" Samantha asked, immediately suspicious.

"A man in financial need is easily bought, and therefore is untrustworthy." She stated the words as though they were fact.

"Don't you trust *anyone*?" Samantha asked.

"Do you?" the French girl murmured sweetly, as she nestled down amongst her pillows.

Chapter 13



Mark and Dick sat together by the drawing-room fire after André Devereaux left. They both looked up as Samantha entered the room and closed the door behind her.

She glanced around, unable to resist a feeling of pride. Curtains had been laundered and pressed, upholsteries and carpets scrubbed, furniture and floors polished. Copper and brass gleamed in the firelight. Flowers were massed in great bowls and jugs. Within so short a time, she had been able to transform Hawksmere, and restore to it a modicum of the elegance she had always associated with it.

She sensed her brother's restlessness the moment she entered the room. Soon he rose and began to pace up and down, brandy glass in hand, swirling the golden liquid absently but scarcely sipping it. She felt that Mark was also aware of Dick's mood, though when she entered, he courteously turned his attention to her. He pulled a chair up to the fire and indicated that she was to sit beside him.

"I must compliment you, Samantha," he said in a warm, low voice. "You have achieved so much in such a short time. Not that I am unduly surprised," he continued when she acknowledged his praise with a modest nod. "I knew you were a determined young woman the moment we met."

"Not the very first moment."

He laughed, recalling the incident. "True, but you wasted no time in telling me, in no mean terms, precisely what you thought."

"May I do so again?" she asked, taking the opportunity with which he had provided her.

"Can I stop you?" he murmured, his mouth quirking with amusement.

"Well, you need not listen, but I hope you will. First, I would like to know who is responsible for that dangerous bridge across the water that we were forced to cross today, and second—" she took a deep breath, for now she was on more delicate ground, "why have you taken no steps to repair the broken wall above the cliff?"

Richard ceased his pacing, and it was now Mark who twirled the cognac in his glass, eyeing it with seemingly undivided attention as he answered casually, "The wall will be repaired in due course. Meanwhile, Samantha, pray concern yourself only with the interior of the house. The exterior is my responsibility."

"That was exactly my reason for pointing out that the wall is in need of repair," she retorted angrily, her eyes blazing in the firelight. "It should have been one of the first things you would have dealt with," she added tactlessly.

"Indeed?" He transferred his thoughtful glance from his cognac to her indignant face, and she knew he had guessed that she had heard the story of his mother's death.

"As for the bridge," he added pensively, "that depends on whose land it happens to be. But if Germaine is to be led into danger spots I myself will ensure their safety. That bridge will be rebuilt as soon as possible, with no one's permission."

"She was not led into danger." Samantha rose in exasperation and faced him squarely. "I crossed first, but I mention it since if she is foolish enough to take such bridges at the gallop, she is equally capable of walking the grounds one day and stepping too near that broken wall."

Mark continued to sip his cognac. Richard took a hearty swig of his. Suddenly impatient with both of them, Samantha burst out, "Don't you realize—," but Mark cut right across her words.

"Set your mind at rest, my dear Samantha. I have warned Germaine to keep away from that part of the grounds. She will not set foot near it. The wall will be rebuilt in due course."

"Due course!" she cried, and gave up. How absurd it was to argue with this man! Again, her eye was diverted by Dick's persistent pacing. So, too, was Mark's, for he commented, "You seem distracted, Richard. You have an assignation, perhaps? Do not allow me to keep you from it. Meanwhile, I am enjoying this very good brandy and your sister's company. There is no need for you to keep a lady waiting."

Dick laughed with a mixture of surprise and embarrassment, and laid aside his glass. He mumbled something inaudible, bowed to his sister and then to Mark and bade them good night. She watched him disappear hastily through the door. Undoubtedly her brother was glad to escape from the lynx-eyed master of Hawksmere.

Mark rose and poured Samantha a glass of Madeira. "You, I trust, are not in such a hurry as your brother?"

"I have no assignation," she answered lightly.

"That is my good fortune," Mark smiled, taking her hand and drawing her back to the seat beside him. "I shall be glad to hear how things are with you. I felt tonight that you were somewhat distraught."

"I was tired," she lied, averting her eyes.

"Was that the only reason? It seemed to me that you had some personal distress on your mind until you heard André Devereaux's story."

He was too perceptive by far. It was true that the doctor's tragedy had jerked her away from her private disappointment over the ruined gown, and Germaine's treachery.

"He is a brave man," she said compassionately.

"I agree."

"But you were anxious in case he reminded Germaine of her own loss."

"Naturally."

Samantha again noted that Mark was too besotted with his love for Germaine to see her clearly. She wondered how long he had known his fiancée, how they had met, what had drawn two people from such totally different worlds toward one another, but she did not yet know the man sufficiently well to ask. In his fashion, he himself was as unpredictable as Germaine—amiable and forthcoming one moment, guarded the next. Samantha was still troubled by his summary dismissal of the dangerous wall.

She made no further attempt at conversation. Let him take the initiative, she decided, and the two of them sat silently for several awkward moments.

Then Mark's voice jerked Samantha back to attention.

"A week ago," he said, "I did not expect to be sitting beside an excellent fire in a room so transformed as this."

"Willing hands can accomplish much," she answered lightly.

"Yours are willing, I can see that. But the others? Not Martha Piper, I'll warrant, although she appears to be knuckling under in spite of herself. I imagine you met with a deal of antagonism from that quarter."

Samantha shrugged. "No. Well, not anymore, at any rate. She listens to me, if not with respect, then with attention. The Thomases are wonderful, and Sarah is a treasure. Alice Turner is cooperative . . ." she paused, choosing her words carefully, "in certain directions."

"Meaning?"

"That she dislikes menial tasks. They make her feel inferior."

Mark raised one eyebrow, evidently about to criticize the girl, but Samantha jumped to her defense before he could get a word in.

"Perhaps she has good reason for her attitude. Being forced into domestic service when her mother could surely have kept her and trained her as a dressmaker seems good reason to me for being resentful."

"So you have heard her story. I take it you have also heard my mother's story, and you resent my apparent indifference to that broken wall."

He had led her skillfully to the precise point he sought. Samantha realized that the friendly approach, the glass of Madeira, and the compliments on her achievements at Hawksmere had all been part of that ploy.

"As you reminded me," she said quietly, "it is no concern of mine. Only the domestic side is my sphere. Rest assured that I shall confine all future comments to that alone."

He laughed. "That I doubt!"

She caught the expression on his face and, in an instant, she joined in his laughter. When goaded, controlling her tongue was never easy.

She finished her wine and laid aside the glass, but before she could make an excuse to retire, he refilled it.

"Please," she waved the glass away as he held it up to her, "I have had enough, thank you."

Settling back in his chair, he regarded her with quizzical

amusement. "But it is such excellent Madeira. I felt you would appreciate such a wine as this."

"I do, indeed. That is why one glass is sufficient. A true connoisseur never takes too much. So if you wish to delay me, sir, pray come to the point."

"You really are the most direct young woman I have ever met!" He slapped his knee in astonishment and turned in his chair to face her.

"Would you have me dissemble?" she asked, smoothing a strand of hair away from her face, which was quite flushed from the wine, the fire and from his attentions.

"I would have you no different from what you are—completely unafraid to speak your mind." He leaned forward, elbows on knees, twirling the cognac in his glass and still, she noticed, drinking sparingly. She looked away from the intense gaze of those gray-green eyes that seemed to devour her with a glance. She willed herself to stop thinking that he had kept her by his side all evening purely for the pleasure of her company. She was nothing more than a useful acquisition to his household, and particularly to the young woman he was going to marry.

Samantha reached out mechanically, picked up her refilled glass, and took a steadying sip, needing the stimulation. She hoped it would calm her, and her racing blood. She could not understand why her emotions were suddenly in turmoil, nor why this man had an infuriating ability to disturb her both emotionally and physically. Making any attempt at seduction was obviously not on his mind tonight. And how could any man seduce me when I have already been seduced? she thought with self-mockery, and immediately a hot tide of desire ran through her. She found herself longing for a repetition of those moments in the library, when she had spurned Mark's advanced and then plunged headlong into a night of passion with her unseen and unknown lover.

She was glad of the coldness of crystal in her hand and the chill of the wine, because as she watched him revolving brandy in its balloon glass she became increasingly aware of the fire in her blood and the fury of her mind. She was nothing to Mark Chaters, nor ever could be. It was little Germaine, lying upstairs in her canopied bed, who obsessed him. He was enslaved by the creature as only a strong man can be by a totally dependent female. Dear God, why couldn't he want a woman who is statuesque and self-reliant

and domestically efficient? Samantha railed inwardly. More than anything in the world she wanted to be loved and cherished and physically worshiped.

Afraid of expressing her feelings in any way, she said good night and started to leave the room. He was on his feet at once, but instead of opening the door for her, he placed his body against it and pulled her to him, his mouth coming down on hers so fiercely that she was unable to break free. Locking her arms behind her, he pressed her hard against him. She felt his manhood, strong and demanding, rise toward her belly despite the barrier of clothes, telling her all too plainly what he wanted. Unresistant, she remained in his arms, feeling his exploring tongue probing her mouth. It was almost as if she were reliving that memorable night's wonder, except that Mark's passion was unlike that of her unknown lover's. He was rougher and more impatient, demanding and forceful, and also, to her surprise, distinctly possessive. It was that which brought her back to reality, anger steadying her reeling senses. She closed her mouth and turned her head away, so his kisses fell on her averted cheek. No gesture could have been more dismissive.

"Don't try any tricks with me, witch!" he growled, tightening his grasp. "You want me to make love to you and that is exactly what I intend to do." One hand went behind his back, locking the door. He thrust the key deep into his pocket.

She could see a pulse beating in his temple, betraying his rapid heartbeat, and her own beat with it. The damnable thing was that what he said was true—his physical onslaught had stirred her betraying blood, but the man she wanted was the man who had lain with her in the darkness and carried her to peaks of ecstasy. Would Mark be violent? It could well be in his nature.

As his arms seized her again, iron-strong and unyielding, she discovered that masculine force was as stirring as masculine tenderness. And however hard she tried to resist it, it could overcome her—was indeed already intoxicating her as he lifted her and carried her to the fireside.

Her body went weak, her head lolled back, and pins fell from her golden hair, scattering on the rug. Her shimmering mane streamed out behind her, spilling over his arms. Supported by his strength, she felt light and compliant and wholly feminine. When he laid her down upon the rug before the hearth and kissed her throat and then the warm swell of

her breasts above the deep neckline of her bodice, still cradling her in his arms, such an upsurge of longing overcame her that her eyes closed in a half-swoon. Her bemused senses carried her back to those delirious hours of darkness when her first lover had claimed her.

Sweet memory now took over, engulfing her in recollected passion; this was not the lord of Hawksmere but the man who had taken her in the summer house. She was floating on the clouds of sensuality that that unknown man had created, delirious with the ever-increasing desire that no man but he could stir. It was all a dream, of course. Her gown and underskirt and chemise were stripped from her harshly, but this was a dream—only in a dream was her naked body spread before her midnight lover. But deep in some remote corner of her rapidly diminishing senses awareness stirred. This time he was impatient, tearing her clothes from her, tossing aside his own and mounting her hungrily, but not before she was ready for him.

And how quickly she was ready, legs apart and back arched to meet him. Now he was loving her wildly, with unrestrained passion, and her hot, eager, hungry body was responding. This time he was murmuring her name, over and over again. "Samantha . . . Samantha . . . dear God, but you are beautiful!" She thrilled to the adoration in his voice and to his devouring mouth, to the rise and fall of his muscular body, to the surge upon surge of desire he thrust into her until her reeling senses and responsive blood felt they would explode into blinding unconsciousness. Then they were soaring toward it together, two passionate bodies that were no longer separate but one throbbing whole, and his lips were kissing away her tears of joy, his passion sobbing in her ear—"Samantha, Samantha!" But that was all part of the dream, of course, because he did not know her name, nor she his. They were the original couple on earth, their happiness more complete and more ecstatic than any that had ever existed or ever would exist.

Then they were still. For a long time they lay with the warm firelight playing upon them. At one moment she opened her eyes and saw the incredible beauty of his sculptured body, lit by the fire's glow, and her own, white as alabaster. It seemed then that the flickering embers executed a dance of love, sending light and shadow flitting across them, and his eyes followed as the crimson sparks were reflected on her breasts,

her limbs and her hair, then highlighted and caressed that moist, sweet, tender part of her that he had entered with such delight.

Then her eyes closed, as she realized that the man was Mark Chaters, who was engaged to marry another woman. Was he thinking of Germaine even now, asleep in her chaste bed while he lay with one for whom he felt nothing deeper than hot lust? She turned away, as if to shut out the sight of him, and he saw the slow trickle of tears from beneath her lashes, no longer tears of ecstasy, but tears of sadness.

Mark put out a hand and cupped one of her breasts, gently massaging the nipple with his thumb, and she felt it rise and harden in response. It seemed as if he understood her mood and wished to make it up to her for what he had done because he found it impossible to resist her. His hunger for her was reawakening now, and every masculine instinct made him able to reawaken it in her. When she moaned, protesting, he silenced her with kisses and rolled his body on top of hers again. She marveled at the feel of his flesh above her, the angle of his hips, the glorious warmth of his arms around her. Samantha knew she would never be cold again. She was fire and passion and physical delight—soft, yielding flesh, and moist longing within, throbbing heat that came surging to meet him when he took her again, rising and falling as he rose and fell. She rocked with him, responding rhythmically to his deep, passionate plunging, giving little cries of ecstasy as pleasure mounted and grew stronger, her ardent flesh demanding more and inflaming him more, loving with abandon.

But even as they delighted in each other, she knew that afterward she would hate him. And even as her wonderful responsiveness spiraled with his, she almost prayed that the final moment could be delayed so that consciousness might never return. If this was madness, then she would embrace it. But the waves of their passion were growing deeper and closer, until there was no holding back the tide and they rose together on the crest of the final, glorious wave.

For a while she slept and, cradling her in his arms, he watched the dying firelight play upon her face. Love had beautified her, as love always does, and her sleep was that of a woman whose body had been not ravished, but glorified. Even so, when she wakened, he was well aware that reality would return and, with it, the realization that she had been loved by a man whose overtures she did not want, and whom

she did not trust. It would seem that he had taken advantage of Samantha's position in his household—and so she would accuse him, for her spirit was as fiery as her nature and as strong as her capacity for love.

At last she stirred. He felt the movement of her limbs against his own and fought down an impulse to kiss her again, to run his hands over her nakedness and down to her thighs, to slide his fingers between and gently caress them, to cover her bare breasts with his hungry mouth, to love her yet again. Dear God, he could make love to this golden goddess all night!

She looked up at him, realization dawning, and the warm contentment in her eyes froze immediately. In one swift movement she left him, rising to her feet and standing before him. He found it impossible to turn his eyes away from her extraordinary beauty. Seeing his expression, she snatched up her gown before he could touch her again, and pulled the garment over her head to cover her nakedness. The rest of her clothes she gathered up haphazardly and, turning her back and sweeping toward the door, she demanded that it be unlocked immediately.

He smiled contentedly. "When I am ready," he answered slowly, pulling on his satin breeches, and, with agonizing delay, he rummaged in the pocket of his tailcoat for the key.

"When *you* are ready!" she stormed. "How characteristic! How typical of your considerate nature! You have used me for your pleasure, and you will now release me only when *you* are ready!" Anger choked her, but even stronger than her anger was her self-hatred. She was ashamed of the weakness of her flesh and condemned even more the weakness of her will—she, who prided herself on having both courage and self-respect. What sort of woman am I, she wondered wretchedly, to yield in love to one man and submit so quickly to another?

"You enjoyed it as greatly as I, Samantha," he said gently. "Be honest, and admit it." He stood by the mantle and the copper hairs of his chest shone and glinted in the firelight.

"And do you know why? Do you know *how*?" she flung at him. "By pretending you were someone else, by remembering someone else. It wasn't *you* I made love to."

The words hit home, sharp as poisoned darts, but not by a flicker of an eyelid did he show any reaction. He said impassively, "And yet you accepted me."

"Submitted to you," she corrected quickly, embarrassed because she could not hide the truth. "Had I not, you would have taken me by force."

"Hell's teeth, you go too far!" he exclaimed. "You use outrage as a screen to hide behind. Whether you submitted to me against your will or not, whether you pretended I was some other man or not, the fact remains that during these past hours your body was mine, and mine was yours, and you loved every minute of it. Don't pretend with *me*, Samantha." He stalked across the room and stood so close she could feel his warm breath on her face. "I know when a woman is cold, I know when the physical side of love is unacceptable to her, and I know when she enjoys it, as you do. God in heaven, what a capacity you have for it! That body of yours is a hot and passionate one and the man who first enjoyed it initiated you well. I knew you were no virgin. Didn't I tell you so in the library that day?" The anger in his eyes had been replaced by a teasing look that was echoed in his voice.

Words sprang to her lips but she hastily checked them. How could she say that at that time she had indeed been a virgin? And why waste time defending her virtue against a man who held it so lightly?

"Kindly unlock the door," she said firmly. "Your cherished bride-to-be may be in need of my services. Even now she may be ringing her bell. Of course, *you* have greater obligations to Germaine than I. You owe her loyalty. Or do you not understand the meaning of that word? It would seem you do not, since you are unfaithful to her without a pang of conscience. Any woman near at hand will suffice. Dear me, m'lord, I seem to have angered you again. But you have angered me as well." Suddenly her control snapped and she blazed, "*Don't you dare treat me as a strumpet ever again!*"

For a moment she thought he was going to strike her, then he calmly unlocked the door and let her go.

Racing down the hall toward the stairs, she found herself stifling sobs. Life seemed to be playing havoc with her emotions, bewildering her and destroying every scrap of self-assurance. Even at this moment she wanted Mark to come hurrying after her, but for what purpose? To apologize? To beg forgiveness? Or to renew his impassioned attack? And why did she feel such guilt about having raged at him? Surely he deserved it. She was too confused to know the answer or to analyze her feelings. How could she love a man whom she

had never seen, lie with him in the darkness and revel in the delight of physical mating, and then repeat the experience with *another* man? What kind of woman am I? she wondered as she stumbled up the stairs, carrying her petticoats and underwear like any whore, which, no doubt, was the way Mark Chaters now regarded her.

Chapter 14



Despite her emotional turmoil, Samantha slept so soundly that the sound of Germaine's bell next morning took a long time to penetrate. When she did eventually stir, she lay there wondering why she felt so gloriously relaxed and content. Then memory came flooding back and the imperative command of Germaine's bell was a harsh reminder that it came from Mark's bride-to-be.

Let her ring, she thought rebelliously. Let her wait. I will no longer serve the whims of that petty child! Last night's experience with Mark made it imperative that she leave Hawksmere as soon as possible. But where? Not back to Aunt Charlotte's gray house! She would have to find employment as governess or nursery maid, and that might take time. How did one go about it? She didn't even know.

And then there was Dick. She would not leave Hawksmere without him, and he would undoubtedly refuse to go, even if she told him her reason. What would he say to the news that Mark Chaters had seduced her and—naturally she would have to let him believe that Mark *had* been the first. Would he be indignant, or amused? Would he comment that it was high time she took a lover and he hoped she had enjoyed it? Very likely. Everyone in so-called society turned a blind eye on a

woman's love affairs. Samantha felt sullied in no way at all, for her physical response had been natural and spontaneous, but she did chide herself for her weakness in submitting to Mark when she was in love with another man. For albeit he was a fantasy and a mystery to her, she remembered her seduction in the summer house with rapture. No other experience would ever be as close to perfection.

No, she decided, pacing her room, she had to leave Hawksmere. Mark would take it for granted that, however much she might protest, she was his for the asking, to be enjoyed in addition to his wife. It was as fashionable for married men to have mistresses as it was for married women to have lovers, the only difference being that wives should be discreet, whereas husbands could openly flaunt their affairs. She stopped pacing and glared at herself in the long mirror. Why should it hurt so much for Mark to regard her as his light-o'-love? She cared not two straws for the man.

But her reverie was disturbed by Germaine's imperative summons. The girl seemed to have clamped her finger on the bell, determined not to release it. Furiously, Samantha pulled on a robe and flung open the dividing door. Germaine was in a pettish mood and was sitting at her dressing table, combing out her curls with a decided frown on her pretty face.

"It is late, Samantha! I had breakfast long ago and now wish to dress."

"Meaning you need my help."

"Of course. You always dress me."

Samantha did not change her cool tone of voice. "Why not try Alice? I think she might suit you well as a lady's maid." Samantha did not budge from the doorway, saying, "Although she is without experience, I am sure she would learn quickly. If you wish, I will suggest it to Mark."

Germaine shrugged. "Why trouble Mark? He will give me what I want, whenever I want it."

"Then ring for Alice. You have only to stretch out your arm to reach the kitchen bell." She turned to leave.

Germaine rose from her table, and there was a new, threatening note in her voice. "When Mark hears of your refusal to help me, he will be angry."

"Let him be," said Samantha sweetly, returning to her room and closing the door behind her.

Scarcely had she done so, when Martha Piper arrived. To her usual scowl was added a disapproving cluck of her tongue when she saw that Samantha was not yet dressed.

"It's that dressmaker from Hythe, Alice's mother. Says you're expecting her. Something about fittings, she said. I like that. You're to have fine clothes, and no more a lady than I. Look at this—look what I'm force to carry around on me back!" She ruffled her drab brown skirt and apron in annoyance.

Samantha had forgotten all about Victoria Turner and the new clothes Mark had insisted upon, but she had to go through with the charade, even though she was now resolved to get away from this house. She would leave all her new clothes for Piper, she decided impetuously.

"I overslept. Please make my apologies, then bring Mrs. Turner up here in ten minutes," she smiled.

Martha grunted and left. Samantha went to the small curtained alcove containing her hip bath and washed herself standing in the shallow pool of water that was all the contents of her pitcher provided. She shivered a little at its coldness. Sponging her bare limbs, she remembered how they had looked in the firelight last night, next to the strong body of Mark Chaters. Oh, stop, Samantha, she told herself. She had to force her mind away from such things now.

She dressed hurriedly and rang Piper to say she was ready to receive Mrs. Turner, who came up the stairs carrying a variety of lovely gowns, her pincushion at the ready. She greeted Samantha at her door and proceeded with the fittings.

They were well underway when Germaine sailed in announcing that Alice had done a fine job with her toilette. She spoke quickly and excitedly, like a child with a new toy.

"With a little training, she should serve me well, *c'est vrai*. She is eager to learn, but she must also learn to speak French. I find conversation in your diabolical English tongue a strain."

Her voice faltered when she saw Victoria Turner, and Samantha surmised that she was undoubtedly noting the resemblance between mother and daughter. The dressmaker continued impassively with her work, seemingly unconcerned that her own daughter was the topic of discussion. Germaine sauntered across the room, and examined the gowns.

"These are good. Very good. Wherever did you learn such fine dressmaking? It is skillful enough to be French."

"I was trained in London, mademoiselle, by a French modiste," said Victoria Turner without looking up from her hemming.

"So you picked up some of the language?"

"Very little, mademoiselle. A few words here and there, all too quickly forgotten once I married and left the establishment."

"But now that French émigrés from Rye are coming to you, you must have much practice in the language, *oui?*"

"I manage. Fortunately they are all *aristos* and mostly fluent in English."

Germaine held up a lemon-yellow brocaded gown against her own diminutive body. She was so swamped by its size that again she managed to make Samantha feel like a giant.

"How wonderful it must be, to be so tall," Germaine exclaimed, laying the gown back over the arm of a chair. "Me, I am no bigger than a doll, alas!" She primped this way and that, planting herself before the long cheval mirror. "My good woman, I may employ you to make my wedding gown," she added gleefully.

"So . . . you do intend to marry Mark?" Samantha blurted out, wishing immediately that she had not spoken.

Germaine stared at her, round-eyed.

"Why else did I come here? Why else did I endure that terrible journey from my beloved France?"

"For safety, as hundreds of others have done. It was just that remark you made the other day—that Hawksmere would never be your home."

"You misunderstood," Germaine said, walking around Samantha and coming to stand beside her. "What I said was that it could never be *home* to me—not that I would never *make* it so. To me, France will always be home; to you, England. But if you were compelled to live in France after marriage, would you not settle there?"

To that, Samantha had no answer. She watched silently as Mrs. Turner repacked her gowns, wondering why she allowed Germaine to make her feel so ill at ease. Just before the modiste was about to leave, she thought of something. She opened her closet and took out the amber dinner gown, asking if it could be repaired.

Mrs. Turner looked shocked. "How did such a disaster occur?" she wanted to know.

Before Samantha could reply, Germaine burst out, "Poor Miss Kimbolt—she met with an accident last night. She collided with the door and caught the material on that dreadful iron latch, and ripped it. Just as she was about to descend for dinner, too. *Affreux!* But it could have been worse. She could have hurt herself."

At Samantha's look of surprise Germaine had the grace to color a little, but she covered her confusion immediately by saying brightly, "I was worried more about you than about your gown, but naturally!"

The dressmaker examined the dress, finally commenting that the damage did not seem to have been caused by catching on something. "It is almost as if it was slashed, Miss Kimbolt!" she murmured, looking from Samantha to Germaine.

"I would be so grateful if this could be restored to its original loveliness," Samantha said in a steady voice, but Mrs. Turner shook her head.

"That would mean an entirely new back to the bodice, and alas, I have no more of the material." Disappointed Samantha put it back in the closet.

"I will take leave of you then," said Victoria Turner, gathering her things and starting for the door.

"Thank you again, for everything," Samantha exclaimed.

"*Un plaisir, madame*—a pleasure to meet you," added Germaine.

As soon as the dressmaker had departed, Samantha whirled around and confronted the French girl. "You were anxious to explain away the damage before Mrs. Turner could examine it too closely," she said accusingly.

Germaine shrugged lightly. "Both you and I know how the gown tore, so I care little for her opinion."

"I agree that we both know how it happened. What I don't understand is why."

Germaine gave Samantha a sly little smile and swept out of the room.

"Master Richard! Wait for me!"

Dick halted and turned reluctantly to face Alice, who was running along the corridor to his room.

"What is it, Alice?" He tried to keep the impatience from his voice, but failed. The girl seemed to be after him constantly these days.

"I have wonderful news! I am now m'amselle's personal maid!" Her excitement was so great that she was unaware of his anxiety to escape.

"That's nice for you, Alice," he nodded, looking away. "Much better than being under Piper's thumb all day."

"I have never been under that woman's thumb, nor anyone else's, and never will be." Alice tossed her head indignantly,

her pride hurt. Then she bubbled over with enthusiasm again. "Don't you realize what this means, Master Richard? I shall be above stairs more often."

Oh Lord, he groaned inwardly. He could not bear to hurt her by telling her the truth—that he had forgotten the charms of other women since meeting Germaine de la Roche. It was her face alone that haunted him now—her delectable prettiness, her dimpled cheeks and soft pouting mouth; her adorable little figure, like a piece of Dresden china, so dainty that she would be as light as a feather in his arms should he dare to pick her up and carry her to some secret place, there to make love to her.

Sudden tears came into Alice's eyes as she asked, "Don't you want me anymore, Master Richard?"

"Of course I do, Alice," he said, flustered, looking for any excuse. "It's just that, well, I'm kept pretty busy about the farm now that Hawksmere has a new master." Conscience moved him as he looked into her anxious little face. Poor little Alice. All she wanted was to love him and to be loved in return—but there was the rub. He had fallen in love with Mark Chaters's bride-to-be, and all hell would break loose were he unwise enough to reveal it.

As far as Germaine was concerned, he felt safer, for she had stated that she was accustomed to male society and obviously disliked that of females. She wanted him with her. And every now and then, when they accidentally brushed against each other, or she stumbled against him as they walked in the fields, her cheeks would flush, her eyelids lower, and her rounded breasts move more rapidly with her breathing. All these were signs that she was as aware of him as he was of her.

Sometimes she would even come in search of him, and they would meet in the orchard, snatching a secret hour beneath the trees. Very soon, the trees would be laden with sweet-smelling blossoms, and when that time came the long dark nights would be withdrawing, putting an end to smuggling activities that demanded winter darkness. Then all of his time would be hers.

Alice's hand touched his, stirring him from his thoughts of the lovely Germaine. "Please, Master Richard . . . now—this minute. M'amselle is taking a nap and won't need me for at least an hour."

"I'm sorry, Alice." He put her hands away from him and took a step backward. "I have to get back to work. I only

came up to change. Don't put temptation in my way," he said lightly, giving her a gentle push. "Now be gone, quickly. I'm sure a lady's maid has some task to do while her mistress rests. A gown to press, a petticoat to launder?"

An affectionate pat on her cheek, and he was gone. She stared at the closed door of his room, tears blinding her. Then rage took over. She knew! How could she help but see the way he looked at that . . . that *Frenchie*.

As Alice raced past Samantha, heading for the back stairs, she wore a look of fury. Samantha glanced from the retreating girl to her brother's closed door, and putting two and two together, did not like the answer. All the more reason for persuading Richard to leave Hawksmere, she reflected, and the sooner the better. And yet, she realized suddenly, she did not wish to go. She stopped her thoughts before she could ask herself why she wanted to remain.

That evening, Mark departed for Calais, sailing with the evening tide. A very sulky Germaine supped alone with Samantha, for Richard had gone to join friends at the Mermaid Inn in Rye. A good thing, too, Samantha decided, doing her utmost to endure Germaine's petulant mood with patience. That her brother had fallen a victim of the French girl's charms she was all too well aware. Samantha was troubled about Dick in several ways, she could not deny it.

She was also troubled about Mark—more than she wanted to admit to herself. At least she had been spared the embarrassment of seeing him since their last memorable meeting. And yet, her body still throbbed from that encounter. She set to work early in the morning, trying to exhaust herself and take her mind off all things sensual, but she found that the task of dusting books in Uncle Jonothan's vast library failed to occupy her brain as it did her hands. Thoughts ran rampant—of her brother . . . of Germaine . . . of Mark . . . and always, over and over, of her secret lover.

At midmorning the following day, she climbed the library steps and perched on the top, systematically working her way along the highest row of books. As she picked up the first on the shelf, she thought about Dick's comment. He had said that the leader of a smuggling gang was usually a man prominent in the county—prosperous and respectable. And yesterday, Mark had gone to Calais. For what purpose?

No. That was absurd! Mark had a flourishing business to which he had devoted all his time and energy since youth.

What need had he to invest in illicit trading? But she knew that when it came to amassing wealth, greed—not necessity—could be the incentive, the desire for more and more, as quickly and as easily as possible.

She dusted a book with shaking hands, replaced it, picked up the next, and so continued along the row, scarcely aware of her actions, her mind awl in protest and denial. It couldn't be true. Mark might be ruthless in going after whatever he wanted, but he was at least forthright, never devious. On the other hand, she recalled that he was not above dealing with the smugglers when it suited him; he had bargained with them for Germaine's safety.

But why shouldn't a man who could feel such tender concern for his bride-to-be still be capable of involvement with murderers and cutthroats? The most obdurate man could love with passion and turn from gentleness to brutality.

Samantha reflected that she really knew very little about Mark Chaters. His true character was an enigma to her. She wished she could know him better, in fact, know everything about him. Suddenly she paused, drawing in her breath sharply. What was she thinking of? Surely she could not be in love with a man so capable of infuriating her! It was true, of course, that he could exasperate her and fascinate her at the same time.

She returned to work feverishly and was halfway down the ladder, working at the lower shelves, when she found herself at eye level with the window that looked straight toward the gap in the wall. To her surprise, she saw two figures strolling together in that direction. She peered at them—that was Germaine, and the man, the man was Uncle Simeon! As they neared the danger spot, Samantha saw him halt, seize Germaine's elbow, and draw her aside. He glanced down at the rough area of ground that must have been disturbed by recent activities, but Germaine was looking around furtively and did not notice. Then they started back to the house. They seemed to be talking desultorily, two strangers who had just met, making polite conversation. As her uncle cast a backward glance toward the wall, Samantha surmised that before he departed, he would contrive a way to examine that area more closely.

She sat very still, watching them. Why had Simeon not come into the house first for a visit? She did not recall hearing the front door close as Germaine went out. But the scene outside did not really interest her. All she could think of, as

she glanced at Uncle Jonothan's desk, was the sad picture of the inebriated old man sitting there, writing, and his head jerking up at the sound of his wife's final cry. She could almost hear the scream, the crash of stone, and the crack of Uncle Jonothan's chair toppling backward as he leapt to his feet in horror.

The door opened abruptly, startling her, and a page from the book she was holding fluttered to the floor as a voice cried, "My dear Cousin Samantha! What are you doing, perched up there?"

It was Patience, smiling and friendly, jerking Samantha away from imagined horror. She recovered quickly, and smiled back at her cousin. "Dusting books that no one has touched for years, from the look of them." She descended the ladder and automatically picked up the loose page from the floor, pushing it into the pocket of her apron. "I see your father outside with Germaine. I am sorry—I had no idea you were here. I must tidy myself before they return. Come upstairs with me, Cousin. I am delighted to see you."

"But not so much to see Papa." Patience grimaced slightly, but in an understanding way. "Do you find him intimidating?"

Samantha could not say that she found him far worse. He had made his dislike of her mother so apparent, it was difficult for her to turn the other cheek and allow that he might have some good qualities. Rather than say anything, she took her cousin's hand and dragged her, laughing, up the stairs to her room.

Patience sat on the side of the bed as Samantha changed, and glanced around admiringly.

"What a beautiful place! How I would love to have a bedchamber like this! Ours is a very humble house compared with Hawksmere. Compared with most people's, in fact. But Papa says we should lay no store by worldly goods, and I suppose he is right. When you come to dine, you will see that he practices what he preaches. He gave away his share of the Kimbolt fortune to deserving charities."

"Am I coming to dine?" Samantha asked curiously, removing a red and white muslin day dress from the closet.

"All of you are. At least, I hope so. That is why we called—to invite you. Papa says it's our duty, but I suspect he is anxious to cultivate Mr. Chaters and to meet his French wife." Patience settled back to enjoy some good gossip.

"She isn't his wife yet," Samantha said coolly, stepping out of her dusty gown.

"I suppose it will be a very quiet wedding, in view of all she had gone through," Patience mused. "I know Papa hopes to perform the ceremony in Rye Church."

"Well, one thing I *can* tell you, Patience, Germaine plans to have her wedding gown made by Victoria Turner."

"Oh, dear," said Patience again, flustered, her hands on her throat, "Papa won't like that. As I told you, he thoroughly disapproves of Mrs. Turner."

Was there anything her uncle did not disapprove of? Samantha wondered. As they descended to the drawing room, she found it necessary to brace herself to meet him, as she would have to do before the coming dinner party in his house.

"You will persuade Mr. Chaters and Mademoiselle de la Roche to accept, won't you, Samantha?" Patience asked quietly but eagerly as they walked through the hall.

"Don't overestimate my influence. You will have the chance to present your invitation to Germaine now. Mark probably won't be back from Calais for a day or two."

"Calais!" Patience stopped and whirled around. "But I saw him in Folkestone, down by the harbor, only this morning," Patience broke off, flushing. Then she added, in an elaborately casual manner, by way of explanation, "I just happened to be shopping in Folkestone and I always enjoy a walk along the harbor wall before returning home."

But Samantha scarcely heeded her. She was too shocked by the realization that Mark had lied about visiting Calais. Uneasily she speculated on the reasons for his deception, and could find none that was reassuring.

Chapter 15



Afternoon tea with Uncle Simeon seemed interminable. He talked in a slow ponderous manner of things Samantha had no interest in, but he did it in such a way as to make every sentence seem a judgment from the Almighty Himself. Whether it was a couple he had married only recently, or the state of the weather, Simeon Kimbolt made it appear that he was the only one with any worthy opinion on the matter. Much to Samantha's surprise, Germaine carried most of the conversation with a lighthearted charm that Samantha had rarely seen in her. As Dr. Devereaux had predicted, she seemed to be improving every day. But her good health did nothing to modify her moods. She swung from despondency to gaiety in a matter of seconds. Unexpected company had brought out the best in her this afternoon, and if she was bored, she concealed the fact very well indeed, for she was even able to charm dear Uncle Simeon.

"I have the great honor of inviting you to dine with us, mademoiselle," Simeon said at last. Samantha couldn't help but wonder if he considered an invitation to a meal at his home tantamount to an invitation from the Archbishop of Canterbury. "Of course, Mark will join us," he went on, "And—" he half turned to Samantha, "and you and your

brother as well," he added in an offhand tone. "Saturday next, say, at seven."

"Let me see," Germaine frowned, fluttering her handkerchief under her petite little nose. "This is Tuesday. That will give my dear Mark time to return from his business trip to Calais," she said. "I do pray that after our marriage he will not have to make many such journeys from home, especially to France, which is in such a parlous state these days, *vraiment*."

Samantha met Patience's puzzled glance, but said nothing, and it was understood between them that no mention should be made of the fact that Patience had seen Mark in Folkestone only that morning. Uncle Simeon merely shook his head in commiseration. "What a blessing it is," he intoned, "that here on the marsh you are safe from horror." He patted Germaine's hand. "In the unlikely event of war breaking out between England and France, dear child, the Romney marsh would be most difficult to invade."

"The area may be flat," he cautioned, "but troops would be hard pressed to land on such marshy ground. I understand a canal is to be built all the way from Hythe as additional protection, enlarging the dike below the cliff into a waterway too wide and too deep to be easily spanned. Such an expense to the country! Alarmist measures, of course. Quite ridiculous. But you are not to fret. Now that you are recovered, you must try your utmost to keep your spirits up."

Patience and her father took their departure after an hour of tedious and often awkward conversation. Germaine closed the door behind them and uttered a great sigh of relief. "If I do not escape from such a stultifying atmosphere at once, I will die," she declared. "Have Firebird saddled for me right away," she commanded.

Samantha hid her reaction to this order and went to do as she had been asked. She would be gone from Hawksmere soon, and removed from any obligations to Germaine. She rang for Thomas and asked for a horse to be saddled for herself as well, deciding to make the best of the day.

Germaine whirled around when she heard this. "Do you consider yourself to be my jailer?" she demanded. "Can I not ride without your supervision?"

Samantha took a breath to quiet her emotions. "You may do so by all means, but I see no reason why I should not ride if I wish." At that, Germaine smiled.

"So you, too, wish to escape from the atmosphere left by

the Reverend gentleman? He is a bore, is he not? And his great large daughter also?" Germaine rolled her eyes to the ceiling, recalling the pair of them.

"I will confess I am not over fond of my uncle," Samantha said evenly, "but I find Patience extremely likable. She has a tolerance for others' bad behavior that I admire greatly." Without wasting another moment on this irritating conversation, she made her excuses and headed for the door.

Upstairs, she changed into a riding habit of dark blue velvet that she found in one of the closets; it was somewhat old-fashioned, but a reasonable fit. She wondered if this garment, like the chatelaine she still wore around her waist when she went about her household duties, had belonged to Ruth Kimbolt.

She went out to the stables, and as Thomas helped her mount, he confirmed her suspicion, remarking that she looked well in the late mistress's costume. "She was a good figure of a woman, was Mrs. Jonothan, very slim for her years."

Mrs. Jonothan—Mark's mother. Samantha regretted that, for it was yet another reminder of the man she wished to forget.

"You have already mounted mademoiselle?" she asked as he handed her the reins.

"Mademoiselle rode ahead with her groom not five mintues since, Miss Samantha." She saw the old man's eyes studying her keenly, and knew he was wondering why the mistress-to-be had left without her, and if anything was wrong between them. Samantha disappointed him by saying that they had not expected to ride together.

"I was tempted outdoors after she had gone, lured away from household tasks by the late afternoon sun. Perhaps I may catch up with her. Did you see which way she rode?"

"Toward Appledore, Miss Samantha. From there, she'd turn either to Wittersham or the marsh."

Germaine disliked the marsh, so Samantha guessed that her choice was more likely to be across country to Wittersham. Therefore, the marsh would be her own choice. It would be a pleasure to be alone, if only for an hour or so.

As she rode down the hill toward the road that spanned the dike below Appledore, she lifted her head to the clean fresh air. She had left her flaxen locks hanging free—the rush of wind through them would surely clear her head and calm her turbulent emotions. As she looked up, she saw the abbey

silhouetted against the sky, and the area of crumbling wall. There was a figure standing beside it.

It was Uncle Simeon—come back to examine the telltale ground, as she had guessed he would. That meant he was suspicious, and that anything he saw would be reported to the Commissioners of Customs. Hawksmere would be watched if activity was suspected there. Samantha shivered a little as she looked up at the man, standing there like a tall black crow, head bent, searching for evidence. Then he glanced slowly downward. He saw her far below, of that she was certain, although from this distance she could see no detail of his face or of his expression. Did she remind him of her unacceptable mother, and did that make him hate her? And if he should inform the authorities about the smugglers, would he then be sealing her dear brother's fate? He had no great love for Dick either.

Samantha wheeled and plunged headlong across the marsh, with the wind thrashing among elms and willows, ruffling the shining waters, carrying wild birds on its tempestuous gusts, and finally blowing from her mind all lingering traces of doubt and fear. In freedom such as this, there was no room for either.

It was almost April, with lengthening twilights and increasingly early dawns. She knew that the peak of the smuggling period would start to diminish soon and with it, the risks her brother took. Perhaps between this smuggling season and the next he could be made to see sense. With shorter nights and longer days, the customs officers became bolder and the dragoons less cooperative with the free-traders.

And, some said, landings were made easier for spies from across the water. In calmer seas, ships could drop anchor offshore and lower passengers into waiting boats, then gather sail and be off before the wind without glancing to see which way the boats headed. It was better not to know, better not to ask questions.

But at least, Samantha reflected thankfully, Richard was not involved in anything like that. Dealing in contraband and risking one's neck in the process might be an enjoyable devil's game to him, but espionage was something else again.

She had ridden at a good pace for longer than she realized. Suddenly she became aware that the afternoon sun had waned and the miles of clear marsh had shrunk to no more than a small patch of mist enshrouded land. Reining, she looked back, unable to guess which way she had come. Just as

she had heard, a marsh mist could drop as suddenly as a curtain.

As she hesitated, wondering which way to ride, there came the muffled sound of approaching hoofbeats, and out of the fog a figure emerged, a well-dressed man, very much at ease in the saddle. Before she could discern his features, she called to him. "Please, could you tell me the way to Appledore?" But the laugh that came instead of an answer sent a chill through her. She had heard that laugh before, softly and eerily. Now it sounded almost evil.

"So, ye're lost, are ye, missie—begging y'pardon, Miss Kimbolt, to be sure."

Jake Dempster looked decidedly arrogant and decidedly prosperous. She could not deny that he looked attractive in his finery. Evidently he earned much from his smuggling activities, and spent it well, or else his good horse and expensive clothes were kept for special occasions. She saw a diamond flashing on one of his large fingers, and beneath a tall-crowned beaver he wore a powdered wig. A high cravat reached to his chin, which had recently been shaved. And the cut-away coat of his Werner costume revealed an expensive striped waistcoat above yellow leather breeches, tied at the knee with tassels. Muscular calves bulged over short calf riding boots. He was a striking figure, but somehow his intense gaze made her uneasy.

"Appledore, missie? It'll be my honor to escort ye. I know the Romney Marsh like the back of my hand, but until ye do, it would be wise not to ride here when the sea mist is rolling in. There be many in these parts who wouldn't be so gallant as to see ye safely home."

Courteous enough, and of course, she had no choice but to trust him. Proceed alone in any direction and she could do nothing but wander into the unknown, or plunge headlong into some dike. The marsh was suddenly a hostile place, full of hidden dangers, so she could do nothing but incline her head in thanks and turn her horse's head.

"This is kind of you, to be sure," Samantha said brightly, hoping some conversation might change the man's mood. "I trust you are doing well—that you have found a position?" She kept her horse slightly behind and to the right of his.

Dempster looked back with a smirk.

"There's no need to play follow-my-leader, missie. We can ride abreast with safety providing ye keep alongside."

He leaned across as he spoke, and took hold of her horse's

martingale so that the beast was close to his own, and every now and then not only his shoulder brushed hers, but his thigh as well. Such nearness was uncomfortable, but there was nothing she could do. The mist was so thick she could scarcely see her hand before her on the pommel of her sidesaddle. Her hair hung limply about her shoulders and she felt, rather than saw, Dempster's sidelong glance. He seemed to have decided not to answer her question about his change of employment. All of his interest was directed at her.

"That's a mighty fine head of hair . . . Miss Kimbolt."

She made no answer. They were proceeding so slowly, but in such circumstances, haste would have been impossible. Marshland meant reeds and boggy patches as well as deep water, only the foolish would travel across it hurriedly in such conditions as this; and whatever he was, Jake Dempster was no fool. He led his horse with confidence, but with care, seeming to know every danger spot. But the journey seemed endless. She even began to doubt whether he was leading her in the right direction, and as if reading her mind he broke into a laugh.

"Afraid, are ye, missie? D'ye think I'm leading you toward Rye, mayhap? Well, don't get too hoity-toity about bein' seen with the likes of me, because the day might come when ye'd be sorry. Jake Dempster is a shepherd no more. He's taken a step up in the world." He leaned over and pressed his face close to hers. "He is steward, no less, at Monks Hall, 'way beyond the county border. It's a grand place, the property now of fine London folk who have put Jake Dempster in charge when they're not in residence. So y'see, Miss Kimbolt, not everyone despises me."

"I have never despised you, Dempster," she said honestly, brushing a damp lock of hair from her face.

"No? Nor the elegant mademoiselle who is to wed the master of Hawksmere? You think *she* doesn't despise me, aristocrat as she is from the tips of her elegant shoes to the crown of her pretty head? I've seen the way she looks at me. Doesn't miss a thing, that one, so when she becomes mistress of Hawksmere I'm thinking ye'd better watch out for yourself. The little French minx might cause you harm."

She was startled by his perception, surprised that he should recognize Germaine's underlying instincts. And yet she knew that Dempster had an eye for the French girl, though little good it would do him. On the last day of his employment, Germaine had gone to Mark, complaining about the man's

bold manner. The way he always stared at her, she said, made her extremely nervous. Promptly, Mark had sent the man packing.

But his new position evidently agreed with him, Samantha thought. Even his air of boldness had subtly changed. Once it had been tinged with defiance; now it was wholly self-confident.

The mist had become as thick as a cloud, but Dempster seemed to know the route he was taking, guiding both horses with dexterity, completely intent upon the business of going forward. His total assurance comforted Samantha, and she chided herself for feeling uncomfortable in this man's presence. So long as he concentrated on reaching safety, she had nothing to worry about.

After they had ridden for another twenty minutes or so, Dempster reined in. "Here ye are, Miss Kimbolt," he said. "Safe and sound with shelter ahead—a shepherd's hut, but warm and dry. It will keep ye safe until the weather clears."

Out of the mist loomed a square of shadow that looked solid and reassuring, standing on firm dry ground.

"If you will kindly tell me in which direction Appledore faces, so I may head there when the mist rises, I shall be grateful," she said drawing up beside him. "And thank you for guiding me so well."

"Don't mention it, Miss Kimbolt." He dismounted and reached up to help her down, placing one hand for her to step into, the other for her to hold. The next minute both hands gripped her waist, lifting her to the ground. They were strong hands, and his face so close to hers was indeed handsome in its rough-hewn way. Again, she could not help but wonder as to the identity of her midnight lover.

Releasing her, he said affably, "To be sure I will, Miss Kimbolt. Appledore faces due northeast. This shelter faces directly east, so ye'll ride straight ahead until ye reach the Appledore bridge spanning the dike, then head north across it." He glanced out into the mist and shook his head. "As for how long this weather will last—well, no one can ever make a guess. Marsh mists are marsh mists."

He held the door of the hut open, waiting for her to pass through, and she moved forward, gratefully, realizing for the first time how numbed she was. Damp and fog had penetrated her clothes, chilling her. Shelter, warmth, a roof over her head, a door shut upon that clammy, foggy world, she was ready to accept it with thankfulness, and did so.

"There's kindling inside," he said as she entered. "I'll light a fire for ye."

"There's no need—" she began, but he was already on his knees, stacking kindling in a rough hearth. The floor of the hut was of earthbrick, but covered with rough matting—a primitive place, but dry. The crackling of wood and leaping flames drew her and, holding out her hands to the blaze, she thanked him. "This was indeed kind of you, going out of your way as you have. I will be fine here by myself now, and thank you again."

"I want no thanks from ye, missie," he said softly. "It ain't thanks I want at all—"

She spun around. He stood with his back to the door, a solid hulk of a man with a look in his eye as old as time itself, which showed all too plainly the kind of thanks he expected.

She dove for the door, but he grabbed her, holding her in a grip as strong as a vice. "I thought ye wanted to get warm and dry." One hand fingered her moist hair. "The fire will dry that off a treat, and ye're clothes, too. Can't sit around in damp clothes, Miss Kimbolt, that ye can't. Nor'll I let ye—"

With one swift movement he ripped off her riding jacket, then his hands were on her blouse, tearing it apart. She felt his calloused hands on her skin, pawing at her breasts; his moist lips, slack and open, were devouring her face. His tongue searched for her mouth, and as she twisted her head this way and that to elude it, he growled and held her tight. She clenched her teeth, ready to bite, and quickly sank them into his thick lower lip, retching at the taste of it. But the only effect of her attack was to inflame him further. He was wholly animal—a gluttonous beast intent on his prey, one hand clutching at a breast and the other at her buttocks, pressing her body against him so that escape was impossible.

Struggling, kicking, biting, gasping for breath, she fought him like a madwoman, clawing at his face with her hands only to hear harsh laughter in her ears as he pushed her to the rough floor and pinned her there while he shook off his coat. Driven with fear and fury, she tore at his throat, and his elegant neckerchief and shirt ripped beneath her fingernails. He laughed with pleasure. "Ye're a savage," he panted, "a savage 'neath those angel looks," and down came his hungry mouth again as he struggled out of his shirt and cast it aside. She writhed beneath his weight, but he was too much for her—his hands brutal, his touch merciless.

Then one hand was beneath her riding skirt, pushing up

between her legs. She felt his probing fingers between her thighs and nausea rose in her. Screams died in her throat, strangled by his cruel mouth, and still she fought; writhing and scratching, her fingernails tearing at the exposed flesh of his back.

Samantha knew exactly what was about to happen to her, that it was only a matter of seconds before he would brutally enter her, with not a thought for how much pain he might cause her. Indeed, this man would delight in her pain. Through the terror of her senses, she tried to clear her mind and plot some method of halting his attack, but she was too terrified to think logically. And surely this man would not listen to reason. He was a beast.

Sprawling on her back beneath him, her arms fell away, spread-eagled, as her mind prayed for oblivion. Her fingers fell against something lying nearby and closed on it instinctively—it was her riding crop, dropped in the struggle. Somehow she managed to raise it high and brought the thongs down across his bare back, lash after lash until he screamed, arching himself away from her in self-defense. As he moved off her, she took the opportunity to roll from under him and stagger to the door. But not quickly enough.

He was on her, yelling curses as he grabbed her from behind, clapping his hand over her mouth to stifle her moaning as he spun her around. Bending backward, she cracked the whip across his face and back again, and she went on lashing out at him like a demon possessed until he yelled and put up his hands to his eyes.

She reeled out into the fog-bound marsh, hurling herself onto the nearest horse, which happened to be her own. She could not mount without aid because it carried a sidesaddle, so she flung herself bodily across the horse's neck as she leaned down simultaneously to release the tether. Panic gave speed to her actions and she did not pause to glance toward that open door through which Dempster staggered, clutching at his eyes. She was off and away into the enveloping fog, riding blindly and uncaringly. It was better to drown in one of the deep ditches than have her body abused by such a man.

For how long she rode, clinging with every ounce of her strength to her horse's neck, she had no idea, but mercifully the animal seemed to know instinctively where the danger spots lay. Through a silent world it picked its blind way, bearing her weight. Samantha listened to each sound, the cry of a bird, the rustle of a branch, but could hear no muffled

hoofbeats echoing through the fog. At least she was alone, unless of course—oh terrible thought!—she was riding in circles, heading back to that isolated hut. If she had to wander all night in this impenetrable world she would do so; at some time the fog must lift and daylight appear. But the air was icy on her bare breasts, and her torn blouse hung in sodden shreds against her back. If only she could hoist herself into the side saddle; if only a woman could ride astride, breeched like a man!

Darkness had fallen now, adding density to the fog. The night was well advanced, and the numbing cold grew more intense. Suddenly the horse stopped dead in its tracks and she heard the whisper of sea about them. They had ridden due south, straight into surf. The horse reared, whinnying in alarm, and she took her time about calming him, stroking his mane and whispering assurances into his ear, wishing she could guide him more effectively than she was able, sprawled across him in this ineffective position.

Somehow she had to get rid of the saddle. She slid to the ground, icy surf lapping her ankles, and, holding the reins in one hand so that the horse should not wander away into the darkness, she released the heavy saddle. It fell from the creature's back and she left it where it lay.

Hitching up her skirts, she gathered strength and leapt astride the horse. She had never ridden bareback before, but it was the only solution. Her horse evidently felt this, too. Quick to obey, he was ready for her command.

Turning her back upon the sea, she started out due north—north, please God, to Appledore and then home. In her state of weariness and shock she did not realize that, for the very first time, she had thought of Hawksmere as 'home.'

But another realization did come to her and, with it, a feeling of indescribable relief, a sensation so lovely that she laughed out loud. She had unconsciously put a hand to her mouth to still the throb of pain left by the fierce pressure of Dempster's ringed hand. A man's hand, wearing a ring, had clamped over her mouth in exactly that way once before *but the ring had been different, and so had been the shape of the hand*. Likewise the touch had been firm, not brutal; nor had the kisses that followed been even remotely like Dempster's. She could rid her mind of the fear that he had been her lover. She rode on with a feeling of elation. She could remember the delights of that night of lovemaking with joy, not apprehension.

And what of Mark's lovemaking? She had accused Mark of taking advantage of her position in his house, but she could accuse him of nothing else. He was not a brute, like Dempster. He was a passionate lover who, whatever else she might think of him, had given her incredible moments of tenderness and excitement.

More important was the fact that Jake Dempster was no longer a menace to her memory. No longer would she shudder at the thought that he was the one who had carried her away to the summer house that night.

Sobbing with relief, she leaned forward and stroked her horse's mane. The animal turned his head to rub against her hand. "You dear creature," Samantha whispered, "we will both remember this ride together. We will remember it always, won't we?" With a whinny of pleasure it tossed its handsome head, shaking its sodden mane and stepping forward with renewed determination, although the fog was still as thick as the coming night would be. And so they rode on, it seemed for hours. Suddenly the horse's hooves resounded against something hollow. Wooden planks. They had moved from the soft turf to the planks that reverberated beneath his tread.

"The bridge!" Samantha cried. "The bridge to Appledore! You clever, wonderful creature!" She ruffled the hair on his neck affectionately.

The animal tossed his head in delight as he stepped confidently across the bridge and up the hill beyond. At the top, the road curved left above the cliffs and straight ahead to Hawksmere. Up here the density of the marsh fog was left behind, replaced by swirling white vapor that rose and descended like clouds blown by a wind. Sometimes it revealed the outlines of trees and hedges in blurred moonlight, sometimes it closed around them. But what matter? They were on the road for home.

Samantha paid no heed to her streaming wet hair or her tattered blouse. When they finally rode into the stableyard she fell forward, clasping the horse's neck and rubbing her face in its mane, calling it all the sweet names she could think of. She was totally unaware of the man who came striding forward, holding high a lighted lamp. "*Samantha! In God's name, is it you?*"

Mark set down the lamp with a crash, sweeping her down off the horse and holding her hard against him. "Where have you been," he raged, "and how *dare* you frighten the hell out

of me like this?" He shook her gently and drew her head against his chest. "You could have been killed, riding in such weather. We've been scouring the countryside for you, Dick and I. . . ."

His hand went to her hair, and then to her face, and the touch of it stifled the explanation on her lips. She snatched at his wrist and stared at the gold signet ring he wore. It was broad and flat. It was her lover's ring.

"It was *you*!" she whispered unthinkingly. "It *was* you, in the summer house! Do you think I don't remember the feel of that ring? Dear God in heaven, why didn't you tell me, why pretend the way you did last night?"

"I pretended nothing," he answered, running his hand over her cheek. Then his glance took in her torn blouse, falling away from her bare breasts. Still holding her, he picked up the lantern and scrutinized her. "Who did this to you?" he demanded in a hollow voice.

She clutched the blouse across her, but not before he had glimpsed the marks on her battered skin. "*In God's name, who did it?*"

"Dempster." Her voice was faint, for now oblivion was about to claim her, the aftermath of the past hours setting in. Mark picked her up in his arms, and as he did so Richard's voice shouted through the gloom. "Mark! There's neither sight nor sound of her—!"

"She is here! She is safe! See to the horse, will you?" And then he carried her from the stable yard to the house, and she let her head fall against his shoulder. In a way she was disappointed that there was no one to see them but her brother. She would have liked Germaine to glimpse the master of Hawksmere carrying her upstairs, cradled in his arms as if she were a burden too precious to lose. She heard through her dazed exhaustion the long-case clock strike twelve. It was midnight! But that did not matter. Nothing mattered but the wonder of discovering that her wish had come true—Mark *was* her lover. She did not care what he was or what he had done, how many women he had made love to or even whether he was a member of the smuggling fraternity. Whatever he was, she loved him—heart and soul and body. She closed her eyes and gave herself up to the rapture of being carried in his arms, upstairs to her room.

But it was to his own room that he took her, far removed from Germaine's. He could not care about Germaine, surely, not after tonight. There he laid her upon his bed and,

removing her tattered blouse, he gently touched her ravaged breasts. There were even the marks of teeth on her lovely flesh, and Samantha heard him moan at the thought of another man brutalizing her. "By God, Dempster will pay for this," she heard him mutter angrily "and pay dearly. . . ."

He undressed her with tender hands. Then he bathed her, dried her hair, murmuring endearments all the while. He lay her between the sheets and covered her. "You can tell me later how you came to fall into that man's hands," he said, stroking her brow as he sat beside her. "I want to know every detail, everything he did to you—"

"He didn't succeed," she whispered. "I promise you, he didn't succeed."

"Thank God for that. I would kill any man who dared to rape you. I would find him and kill him and enjoy doing it." The words and the tone were savage, his face dark, but his eyes were filled with love for her. "And now," he commanded as he banked up the fire, "you must lie still until I return." She was more than willing to obey and she basked in the warmth of his bed in a half-doze until he returned with a bowl of broth. Not until she had swallowed every mouthful did he allow her to talk. After she had recounted the entire story, and she lay in the hollow of his arm resting, she dared to look into his face and question him.

"Why didn't you let me know who you were, that night in the summer house?" she insisted. "Why didn't you even tell me last night? I thought it couldn't have been you because you made love to me in such a different way—"

"A man doesn't always make love in the same fashion, Samantha. Sometimes impatience drives him, as it drove me last night. I was so hungry for you, so obsessed with desire for you, as I had been ever since I left you in the summer house, vowing that never again would I yield—but oh, my lovely one, you are irresistible!"

She reached up and curled her arms about his neck, free now to demonstrate her true feelings for him, released from doubt and bewilderment because every fear was laid to rest, wild with happiness because when he had taken her in the library, it was because they already belonged together.

"Oh, Mark," she declared, unashamedly, "I do love you."

"My sweet." He stroked the golden cloud of her hair and spread it over the pillow, framing her face.

"I would never have touched you had I known you were a virgin—you know that, don't you, Samantha?" he said

gently. "It was a shock to discover that you were. I only knew that you were a beautiful young woman who had been brought up unconventionally by her unorthodox father. One so lovely, I assumed, must not only have been pursued by men but, in such a world, must have inevitably lost her innocence. And you did not deny it, sweet love, remember that." He ran a finger around her lips and she kissed it. His teasing smile was there again, not mocking this time, but rueful.

"And so you taunted me again last night—" she protested, reaching up to take his hand and lay it on her breast.

"Teased you, not taunted, my lovely witch. I couldn't resist it. And I wanted to see some betraying flush come to your cheek, some hint that you were remembering how you lost your virginity. You are adorable to tease, and adorable when challenged or angry."

She settled back into the pillows and gazed at him intently.

"I have something to confess, Mark. I have been wishing you were the man in the summer house. I could not understand why I should feel so, but now I do. I love you, my dearest. I love you deliriously, but I could not reconcile my feelings with those I felt for the man who loved me in the dark, and with those for the man who loved me later in the firelight, nor could I believe it could possibly be one and the same person, because each time your lovemaking was different. . . ."

"But delightful," he reminded her, again with that teasing smile.

"Infinitely delightful," she agreed. "What puzzled me was the ring. I have never seen you wear one, but the man who first loved me did so. I remembered the feel of it, pressed against my mouth."

"And here it is." Mark held up his hand. "My seal ring, which belonged to my father. I wear it only when I need to imprint my seal on a document. I forgot to remove it on returning from my business sojourn in Calais today."

Samantha started. "But you did not go there!" she accused. "I know because Patience saw you down by the harbor in Folkestone."

"She may well have seen me, my love. I was delayed by the tide. I will cross when the currents are more favorable."

"And the night the smugglers were here?" she persisted, running her fingers over the embossed surface of his band. "Why were you wearing the ring then?"

"For the same reason; I had stamped my seal on a business transaction that day. Has your lively mind any further questions, or may I proceed to make love to you, for which I am becoming increasingly impatient?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "There is something I must know. What of Germaine?" She turned his face to her so that she would see everything in those gray-green eyes.

"What of her?" His face was suddenly expressionless.

"You are engaged to be wed. . . ."

"That is so."

"But Mark—"

He stopped her with a finger across her lips. "My love, you must trust me. My relationship with Germaine is something I have settled in my own conscience. Now you must do the same."

She looked at him questioningly and it seemed to her that he wanted to say more, but could not. As close as they were, still he was the man of mystery.

"Well, then," she sighed, "since you will not enlighten me on that score, tell me one more thing. Why were you out on the grounds that night? Are you one of them—the smugglers, I mean?"

"Now that, my darling, is a question no one in these parts is ever so unwise as to ask another."

He silenced her then with a kiss and, slipping into bed beside her, his exploring hands started their delicious love play until her senses became bemused and she forgot the outside world. She helped him to remove his clothing and soon their naked bodies were together again. Only here, in the depths of this luxuriant feather bed, did her world now begin and end. The whole night was theirs and their bodies prolonged the pleasure of giving and taking, of sharing passion, of coming together in ever increasing desire. Body merged with body, mind with mind, as they sailed as one being on the wild seas of their love.

After glorious fulfillment, they slept, only to stir in the night and come together again. "You are insatiable, my love," she murmured as she felt his manhood rising within her, growing bigger and stronger with every passionate thrust.

He whispered in return, "As you are, my witch . . . my beautiful enchantress . . . my lovely one . . ." and she cried out in delight with every surging wave of joy, thrilled by his strength and the heat of his passion as he plunged ever more

rapidly into her. He ravished her totally with his love until they climaxed together and sank deep into the billowing feather bed in ecstasy and exhaustion. Never had a man and woman belonged together so completely. Samantha fell asleep on the thought, a smile of contentment and trust on her lips, so blinded with happiness that she did not even recollect that he had never actually said that he loved her. And only in the morning did she remember that he had refused to answer her question about the young woman he had intended to marry.

Turning sleepily to her lover she murmured, "I don't want Germaine to be hurt."

"She won't be."

He yawned and stretched his magnificent body, flinging back the bed covers and gazing down at her. "If only there were time," he said with the familiar, teasing smile, "I would make love to you all over again. But alas, the night is over and I have work to attend to."

She was left with a sense of loss and yet with a sense of joy, confident that there were endless nights and endless days ahead of them. She would share a whole lifetime with this man whom she loved and who had demonstrated how passionately he loved her in return.

Chapter 16



Only one thing marred Samantha's happiness—a sense of guilt where Germaine was concerned, and also a feeling of apprehension. Meeting the girl face to face would be difficult. Germaine would take rejection badly. There would be tears and tantrums, reproaches and reproofs—even a relapse, and a return to her former state of grief. And I will be to blame, Samantha acknowledged to herself. If she accuses me of acting without conscience, she will be right. The wild, sweet selfishness of her love had urged her to obey all her primitive instincts and to forget that people and morals and principles even existed. And yet, her inner voice countered, had Germaine ever considered Samantha's feelings? The French girl thought of herself in every instance. Samantha went up to her room, having partially convinced herself that she was no more selfish than her former rival. And love made her generous—she would be kind to Germaine, and understanding.

She found the girl propped against a small mountain of lacy pillows, sipping her chocolate, which Alice now served her each morning. It had become Samantha's custom to call upon Germaine to greet her each morning—as did Mark. While hoping, in a way, that he had not done so today, in another

way Samantha hoped he had, thereby wasting no time in ending their betrothal. Or would he consider it callous to break the news briefly and hurriedly before leaving for Folkestone?

Germaine's bland demeanor confirmed that, as far as she was concerned, nothing was changed. So Mark had either avoided a meeting or decided to say nothing until a more suitable moment. Samantha tried to calm the turmoil within her, but this morning she found it difficult to hide her feelings.

"You look as radiant as Mark did when he came to kiss me good bye," Germaine purred, sipping her chocolate delicately.

Samantha took a step toward the window, turning her face away. What sort of kiss had that been? Brief and perfunctory, or guilty and compassionate?

"I do declare," Germaine continued, as if she had read Samantha's thoughts, "that Mark's vitality so early in the morning is positively wearing, and he fully expects me to respond with passion though I am yawning my head off! I told him that after we are wed he must not expect me to rise at the same ungodly hour as he, but all he did was to laugh and kiss me and tell me he would expect no such thing, that I could sleep as long as I liked. With you to supervise things, I will have no need to worry about breakfast being served to other members of the household. I should hope not, indeed, for I could not face the hearty breakfast with which you English start the day!" She held up a delicate little hand to silence any comment. "Oh, I know what you are about to say, Samantha—that Mark spoils me. You are right, and I adore him for it. And now what plans have you made for today? An outing, I hope, to relieve my ennui? Life in the country is so dull!"

Samantha's sense of guilt evaporated at once. Why should she be ashamed of stealing the love of the man this girl fondly imagined she was going to marry? It was plain that Mark had deemed it prudent to maintain the charade until a more opportune moment. Well, it would do the French girl good to find out that life would not always pour good fortune into her lap. Loss of home seemed to have left little imprint upon her, and no wonder, for she had stepped straight into comfort and security. Even the loss of her parents was a subject she never referred to now. Was she totally callous and unfeeling? Impatience vied with Samantha's rising anger.

"I have no time for outings today," she said somewhat

curtly. "I have household duties to attend to, and a task I started in the library is unfinished."

"Let it remain so! Look outside, Samantha, and see how lovely the day is! You know Mark employed you to be a companion to me. I fancy he would not be pleased were I to tell him that you refused to be one." With an imperative gesture, she indicated that her tray could now be removed, and Samantha found herself picking it up automatically. What Germaine said was true, and until Mark broke his betrothal to this pretty, willful creature, it would continue to be true.

"Very well," she said unwillingly. "While Alice helps you with your toilet, I will see Mrs. Thomas about the day's menus."

"Do see that she produces something palatable."

"She is doing very well, I think. In this last week she has produced two of your favorite dishes, and even you could find no fault."

With that, Samantha left her. She had no desire to spend the day with Germaine, but she had no choice. After consultations in the kitchen and delegation of work to Piper and Sarah, Samantha went back upstairs to change from her morning dress into an outdoor costume. The daily selection of one of Victoria Turner's creations was a continual delight. There was a mauve street dress she had not yet worn; it would be suitable for a drive, wherever Germaine chose to go, which was likely to be a town, the bigger the better. Germaine preferred people and shops and plenty of life to the quiet of the countryside. Sometimes Samantha found it hard to believe that the French girl was a product of the peaceful Loire valley.

As she untied her apron and cast it aside, a paper fell from the pocket. Stooping to retrieve it, Samantha looked at it curiously before remembering that she had thrust it there when Patience arrived so unexpectedly. It was a sheet from one of the books that she had intended to replace. Now it stared up at her—not a printed page, but a sheet on which faded copperplate writing sprawled.

There is no more to set down. There is relief in purging one's mind of the truth, yet even now cowardice urges me to destroy this page. I must be resolute, like Matt, who was unafraid of life. I, alas, am made of weaker stuff. Still, as a gesture to some sort of courage, I shall not

destroy it, but hide it in the way I have planned. Perhaps someone may find it after my death and piece the facts together.

She sank down upon a window seat, seeing nothing of the world outside, only the words penned by a shaky hand. Uncle Jonothan's? Was this a sample of the 'scribbling' to which her brother had referred? What was this? Part of a story, perhaps? Had the old man secretly indulged in novel writing? But Matt—that had to be her father. This appeared to be some kind of confession, or part of one, at least. The final sentence implied that other pages had been concealed, in places where no one would be likely to look.

Abel Hardwick and her brother had gone through Jonothan's desk, his deed boxes, his papers, his masses of unpaid bills. If there had been anything else, anything in the way of a confession of guilt, Hardwick's avid legal eye would have pounced upon it, particularly at a time when the Kimbolt family would have been only too glad to find some excuse for overturning Uncle Jonothan's will.

Samantha looked around. She had to find a good hiding place. At last she went to the closet and tucked the page in her shabby valise. It had neither lock nor key, but no one would be curious about searching inside that ancient carpet bag at the back of the high closet shelf. She would look for the other pages and hide them with this one until she had the whole. Undoubtedly, if one page had been concealed in a dusty book, similar hiding places could have been used for the rest, unless, Samantha smiled to herself, her uncle had a more devious mind than she did. There were hundreds, no, thousands of possible places in Hawksmere to secrete evidence. Well then, she would have to turn sleuth and search them all out. She would start with the library. No one in Uncle Jonothan's household had used that room but he. His entire stock of books might even be disposed of some day without anyone glancing through them, and then his confession would go with them.

But what had he to confess? What burden of guilt had troubled him? What if it were something ugly which, later, she might wish never to have known?

Whatever it was, she had to find out. This was her family, after all, and she felt it an obligation to all those Kimbolts who had preceded her, and all that might follow. Also, she had to admit, she was wildly curious. This compulsion to

ferret out the truth urged her to get to work in the library again as quickly as possible.

Germaine selected Canterbury for the day's outing. "I have never seen it, Samantha," she explained, "and I know of its impressive past. Besides, I am in need of a lesson in English history. You will teach me, no?"

In the Martyrdom of the cathedral, where Thomas à Becket had been murdered, Germaine rested her hand upon the great pillar to which he had clung in his desperate attempt to fight his four assailants. As Samantha told her of the incident, she stroked the stone with a fascination that was surprising and rather repellent. She wanted to hear every detail of the barbaric slaughtering, and even knelt on the stone flags to stroke a dark patch. "Are these bloodstains?" she asked eagerly.

"Bloodstains after six centuries, Germaine?" Samantha asked briskly. "Don't let your imagination run away with you."

"Why should it be imagination? Why should immortal blood not leave an eternal mark? It was a crime against all Christendom!"

Samantha turned and walked out into the cloisters, hoping Germaine would refer no more to the Archbishop's murder. She almost seemed to relish the talk of blood and killing. Not for the first time, Samantha found herself wondering what precise thoughts went on in the young woman's seemingly sensitive head. This afternoon they seemed determined to follow one particular trend, for later, as they climbed into the carriage, Germaine calmly instructed Thomas to drive home through Hythe. When Samantha pointed out that there was a quicker way, Germaine answered with a little smile, "Ah, but the castle those murdering knights lodged in cannot be glimpsed from there, and I would very much like to see it."

And so they took the longer route, pausing on the notorious Blackhouse Hill to look down on Saltwood Castle in its sylvan setting. It was impossible to believe that in so gentle and lovely a place Becket's abominable murder had been planned.

"Now, let us see if I recall what I have read in the history books," Germaine said, frowning her brow with the effort of remembering. "One of the murderers, Hugh de Morville, was banished from the country. His fine house and his estates

at Wadhurst, over the border in East Sussex, were confiscated."

Samantha remained silent, looking out of the carriage window.

"Not much of a punishment, do you agree? In my opinion," Germaine continued animatedly, "they should all have been beheaded."

The cool way in which she spoke the words shocked Samantha. It seemed even more shocking that she, who had recently lost her parents beneath the guillotine, could condone decapitation. Samantha looked at her guileless face with its doll-like features, and suddenly saw it as a mask that she wanted to tear aside. What was she *really* like, this creature in whom neither Mark nor her own brother could see any fault? Was she really no more than a child who could not fully comprehend the finality of death, to whom villains planning murders in castles seemed to be no more than bad men in wicked fairy stories? And yet this same naïve babe had been quick to suspect André Devereaux of devious qualities.

Germaine signaled Thomas to proceed. "Tell me, Samantha," she asked as they moved on, "why is this road called Blackhouse Hill?"

"I have no idea. Like you, I am unfamiliar with these parts, but I am sure that Thomas, born a Kentish man, could tell you. Do you know, Thomas?"

"Aye, m'am. That I do. There was this monastery that stood up t'the top of this hill, the first to be closed by Henry VIII because of the evil done by the monks livin' there. A real black house, 'twere, ma'am, and they do say as how the ghosts o'monks can be seen, leaning on this very stile looking down on the valley o' Saltwood, disapproving, mebee, o'them murdering knights, tho' they themselves were no better'n they oughta bin, from all accounts. 'Twere known as the Black House even in them days."

Germaine bobbed up and down in her seat, more excited than Samantha had ever seen her. "And the monastery, the wicked one—where did that stand?" She leaned out the window, trying to take in the whole scene.

"Right where it be standing now, m'mselle. Alongside us."

On the opposite side of the hill, it was standing well back, high walls curving inward to an imposing pair of wrought iron gates. The ancient emblem of a religious order was emblazoned in the metal, and in the pillars on either side were

carved the words, MONKS HALL. They seemed to leap from the stones at Samantha. Her heart pounded. Jack Dempster was the one who had first mentioned that name. Dempster, who had been appointed as steward by the London folk who now owned this place.

"What the monastery were called, no one now remembers," Thomas was saying. "It were changed to Monks Hall many a year ago."

As they gazed at the hall and the lodge beside it, a figure appeared on the doorstep. As if conjured up by Samantha's unpleasant memories, there was Dempster! He stood watching them, legs astride and arms akimbo, with a patch over one eye. Even from this distance the wheals upon his handsome face could be seen, stark reminders of Samantha's lashing whip and good cause for the hatred evidenced by his expression. He ignored the others and stared at her with undisguised malevolence. Then, after a long moment, he bowed and smiled in Germaine's direction, doffing his hat. He swaggered over to the wrought iron gates and brazenly pushed them open, inviting her in.

"If it be sights ye want to see, m'amselle, Monks Hall is worth a viewing. It would be my privilege to show ye 'round."

Why was he so courteous to Germaine, Samantha wondered, she who had supposedly despised him? She steeled herself to assess Dempster with detachment when he approached the carriage. The wheals on his face could disappear in time, but how badly had she damaged his eye? In memory she could hear his screams as the whip bit across his face, but she felt no remorse. He would have done worse things to her had she not fought him off.

Now he had the audacity to open the carriage door, holding out a hand to Germaine, who withdrew slightly. As she tried to close the door again, Dempster's strong hand stopped hers and held it ajar.

"The owners being away and me being in charge, I be glad to invite you into Monks Hall," he said firmly. "Mayhap you'd care for a stroll on the grounds? They be very beautiful. On a day like this, the coast of France can be seen. I'm sure ye'd like a view of it, m'amselle."

Germaine shook her head. "No. No. I thank you. . . ." She gave a little tug at the carriage door, and the embroidered bag dangling from her wrist slid down over her fingers. Startled, she jerked away and it fell to the ground at

Dempster's feet, spilling its contents. He was on his knees at once, picking them up. From her seat on the opposite side of the carriage, it looked to Samantha as though his actions were unnecessarily slow.

"Thomas, pray give a hand," she said, and the coachman slipped the reins over the bridge of the carriage and climbed down from his perch. By the time he had shuffled to Dempster's side, however, the man was rising. Samantha noticed him slip something into his pocket.

"I trust all the contents are there?" she asked Germaine, who examined the bag hurriedly and nodded, throwing a muffled word of thanks to Dempster as she looked away. This time he took the hint, stepping back as Thomas closed the door firmly.

Germaine gave Dempster a cool nod and he bowed low in return. The coach jolted into motion. The mockery of that bow did not escape Samantha, nor did the twist of a smile below the black eye patch, for the smile glinted with hatred as he turned to Samantha. She shuddered and vowed she would never allow herself to be caught alone with this man. The threat in his glance was unveiled and terrible.

Thomas flicked the horses as they drove off and sniffed contemptuously. "That there Dempster's always landed on his feet," he remarked. "Which is more'n he deserves, I reckon, occupying that lodge an' all. Standing on the doorstep as if 'e were waitin' fer us, that 'e were, but 'e were allus one to idle if 'e could. Us never did like Dempster, nor trust 'im. 'Awksmere's better off without 'im, that I swear."

Germaine snuggled into her corner, urging Thomas to spare no time in getting home. "Tonight we are to dine with your saintly uncle," she reminded Samantha, changing the subject hastily, "which means we must dress as soon as we reach the abbey." She reached up and touched the brim of the bonnet covering her curls. "What style shall I have Alice dress my hair tonight, I wonder. . . ." she mused. "She is quite a talented girl. *Très adepte*. I might even ask her to suggest something."

Her thoughts of Dempster were gone already, but not Samantha's. She was worried about whatever it was he had slipped into his pocket.

"Germaine, are you sure the man replaced everything in your bag?"

"My dear Samantha, I *told* you! *Alors*, I will look again.

But if something is missing I vow the man can keep it, for I have no intention of going back. One encounter with him is quite enough! Ah! You are right," she said, fumbling with a perfume flask and handkerchief. "A crown *is* missing. He is nothing but a wretched thief!" She jerked the strings of the bag together, thoroughly vexed, then shrugged. "But what is a paltry crown?"

Samantha felt that a paltry crown was sufficient to feed a hungry person for a month, but she said nothing. She was glad Germaine had no intention of going back to retrieve it.

For the evening at Uncle Simeon's, Samantha chose a gown of Empire style, made in soft watered silk of peacock blue, shot through with emerald, the sleeves long and clinging and the neckline not too low for a sedate clergyman's household. When she came downstairs and found Germaine already waiting, she was frankly shocked. The French girl's costume verged on the scandalous. She was dressed in a semi-transparent Grecian chemise, with no under-petticoat. The girdle was tied beneath her breasts, and her bosom was tantalizingly exposed. Made of flame-colored chiffon, it was an admirable foil for her dark curls, which Alice had dressed in Grecian style, cascading at the back over bands of gold braid.

When they arrived at their destination and Germaine discarded her fringed cashmere shawl, Samantha could not help but notice her cousin's startled glance. Such an extreme fashion as Germaine wore was the vogue here only in undesirable circles, although in Paris it was quite acceptable. Samantha could imagine Uncle Simeon's disapproval when they entered the drawing room.

Then she thought of Mark examining Germaine in her too-revealing chiffon. The French girl still believed she was to be his wife. The sooner Mark dealt with that, the better. But as yet no opportunity had presented itself. He had returned from Folkestone long after they had returned from Canterbury, after a particularly busy day at the boatyard, with time only to prepare for the evening ahead. Had Germaine dressed so flamboyantly to please her betrothed, or simply to send tongues clacking from Appledore to Hythe? Samantha wondered. Germaine well knew Patience's love of gossip, but it was too late to worry about this now.

Patience directed them upstairs to a chilly bedroom to

remove their wraps. As Germaine put down her shawl, Samantha noticed something glinting at her throat. A necklace of diamonds. Her glance met Samantha's in the mirror, and touching the jewels proudly she said, "Are they not beautiful, Samantha? Dear Mark's betrothal present to me, and, he promised, I shall have more when we are wed."

Frank and unashamed jealousy cut Samantha to the quick. She had no response as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat, and preceded Germaine out the door and down the stairs.

The drawing room was as chilly as the bedroom. She could scarcely repress a shiver within the gloom of darkly paneled walls that were unrelieved by the glow of even a small fire. The empty dog grate in the inglenook indicated that in her uncle's opinion, late spring evenings did not justify such extravagance. Picturesque as the vicarage was, diamond lead-lights darkened the windows and the low hanging beams, blackened with age, added further to the gloom.

It was more than evident that Patience had spoken the truth when she said that her father's share of the Kimbolt fortune had long ago been invested in charitable causes. Samantha longed to tell him that for his daughter's sake, charity might have begun at home. Simeon practiced the virtue of self-denial to the letter, and in so doing, ensured his daughter's discomfort.

In the shadowy drawing room, the vividness of Germaine's gown stood out like a beacon, but if Simeon considered its transparency to be shocking, he was too well-bred to reveal it. As he welcomed her, he bowed over her hand with all the courtesy expected by a Frenchwoman, subtly suggesting that his humble abode had never before been so honored. He did not seem surprised that a young woman whose parents had only recently died was not wearing mourning, probably assuming that in fleeing from her country there had been no time to purchase such clothes, and that since her arrival she had been too distraught to think about them. The benign and understanding glance with which he favored her was paternal in the extreme.

But he gave no such kindness to Samantha. His acknowledgment of the play-actress's daughter was perfunctory, emphasizing that in his opinion there was a marked difference between the daughter of an aristocratic marriage and the daughter of a scandalous one. Samantha found it difficult to

hide her amusement at this, and then, to her joy, she saw it reflected in Mark's face. He came over to her, bearing a glass of wine, and, raising his own in silent toast, he gave her that intimate, teasing smile of his. It no longer enraged her; now it challenged her and stirred her blood.

In a low voice he said, "I am glad your uncle's attitude fails to perturb you, dear love, but I suspect that what lies behind it is something deeper than you imagine."

"What do you mean?" She took the glass from him and bent her golden head low over it, so that their conversation would not be noticed.

"That I am a shrewd observer," he answered enigmatically, and turned away to answer some remark of her uncle's. Just then, he saw, as Samantha did, her brother's enraptured glance fixed upon Germaine.

Patience fluttered around in a fever of anxiety, hoping that the wine was worthy of such sophisticated guests. In truth, it was bad—a harsh red of indeterminate origin—and the food was unappetizing and unimaginative, boiled beef and dumplings, followed by a heavy suet pudding smothered in syrup, and not even a tasty remove or two between courses. It was no menu for someone accustomed to French cuisine, and Patience's troubled eyes did not miss the way in which Germaine toyed distastefully with the food and left her wine untouched after the first sip.

Dick was swallowing his valiantly, but behind his table napkin he muttered, "The sacramental wine, d'you think, Sister?"

Samantha kicked him sharply beneath the table. She cared not a fig for any embarrassment he might cause their uncle, but Patience was another matter. Her cousin's anxiety that this dinner party should be successful was so patent that Samantha was determined to help her. She therefore downed every mouthful, and allowed her glass to be refilled. She was grateful to Mark for doing the same.

The men finished their port early. From the expression on her brother's face when they emerged from the dining room, she guessed that that, too, had been inferior. She was surprised, however, when her uncle seated himself in the most comfortable chair in the room and addressed himself to Mark without further preamble.

"I am glad to have this opportunity to speak with you, sir. I have something of the utmost seriousness to discuss."

"Indeed? And what might that be?"

Mark's voice was only mildly curious, whereupon Simeon Kimbolt rapped out angrily, "The matter is not one to be treated lightly, I do assure you. I have grave suspicions to impart, sir. Suspicions that must concern you personally. It is my belief that Hawksmere is being used for illegal purposes."

Chapter 17



Samantha's irrepressible brother gave a shout of laughter. "In what way, Uncle? As a bordello?" He slapped his knee with relish. Seeing the man's scandalized face he continued unperturbed, "If you use the phrase 'for illegal purposes' in connection with a private residence, sir, what else can it mean?"

Uncle Simeon favored him with an icy glare and turned back to Mark.

"You, I am sure, understand."

"On the contrary," Mark replied, throwing up his hands, "I can think of no illegal purpose other than the one Dick just mentioned. Pray, enlighten me."

"I suspect that your premises are being used for illicit trading."

"In what way?" Mark asked without hesitation.

"Contraband, sir," Simeon stood and walked across the room. Then he whirled around to face Mark. "Smuggling," he stated flatly. "It is rampant in these parts, as you must well know."

"One hears of it," Mark answered indifferently, "but personally I am unacquainted with it, and if anything like that were taking place at Hawksmere, I am sure your late brother

would have taken steps to deal with it. One could scarcely live in a place where such activities went on, without knowing of it."

"Unless, of course, one were reaping benefit from it by turning a blind eye."

"Meaning?"

"I have been frank enough, surely? Free-trading is illegal, and aiding and abetting it equally criminal. As parish priest it is my duty to acquaint the law with any suspicions I may have." He seated himself in an armchair and sat forward with his hands on his knees.

"Is that all you have to go on? Suspicions? Proof is what the law would demand—and I demand it too," Mark said angrily.

"You can see it for yourself if you take the trouble to visit the spot where your mother met her death."

A shadow seemed to cross Mark's face, though not a muscle moved. He seemed frozen to his chair.

"And how did you come to visit it, Reverend? And when?"

"Quite by chance, I assure you. When my daughter and I called the other day, and Mademoiselle de la Roche accompanied me for a stroll in the grounds, we happened to pass the spot. The evidence was there—the ground heavily trodden, and tracks down the cliff on the opposite side of the wall."

"And you went back later, didn't you, Uncle, to take a good look!" Samantha put in. "I was far below on the marsh, but I saw you up there—and you saw me watching you."

His glance plainly said that she had no part in this conversation, but Samantha refused to be ignored. She was aware of her brother's attention; beneath his customary pose of negligence, he was taut and wary.

Mark took a breath and leaned back in his seat. "Surely it was unnecessary to carry out a secret examination," he commented. "In my absence you could have questioned Richard. He would have been able to explain. We have had workmen all over the place, examining damaged structures, hence the reason why the ground was so disturbed. What did you imagine those rough tracks to be? Trails where smuggled goods had been hauled up?"

"Indeed no—where they had been lowered."

"I suggest you visit the spot again and see for yourself precisely what caused them," Mark insisted, his eyes now the steel gray color that Samantha knew betrayed his roused mood. "Both the abbey and the surrounding walls are built of large slabs of stone," he went on. "It would take only a few

tumbling down to scar the cliff-face. And I would very much like to know what kind of goods you imagine Hawksmere to be trafficking in."

"Wool. Fleeces. What else?" Simeon pointed an accusatory finger in Mark's direction.

"From that pathetic flock my stepfather owned? Who would buy such poor quality? I sent the creatures to market, and a very low price they fetched."

Mark rose, closing the conversation. "I do thank you, sir, for your hospitality. Please put your mind at rest. I do want to make it clear," he continued in the same polite tone, "that I would have admired you more had you called upon me with your accusations, rather than issue a social invitation in order to do so."

"My dear Chaters," said Simeon, hastening to Germaine's side as she rose from her chair. "I am not accusing *you*, nor anyone in your household—unless some of your servants are involved unbeknownst to you. But it is common knowledge that smugglers are no respecters of property. That is why I keep my stable doors locked at night, or they would continually be used as dumping grounds. Hawksmere has endless hiding places of which the unscrupulous could avail themselves if they so chose." His eyes flickered to Germaine meaningfully. "If your betrothed should overhear things she should not, and try to investigate, the good Lord knows what her fate would be."

"We all know, besides the good Lord," Samantha put in serenely, and Germaine piped up, "I pray you, Reverend, do not frighten me so! Let us talk of more pleasant things before we take our departure from your house. My marriage, for instance."

"Did I tell you, Mark," she said brightly, tripping over to him and taking his arm, "that the *magnifique* Victoria Turner has agreed to make my wedding gown? I have chosen the design already and she has undertaken to start it at once. *Voilà!* There will be no more waiting, my love, and your impatience will soon be at an end."

Shock robbed Samantha of breath, but when Mark stooped over Germaine's hand and kissed it, she thought her heart might stop beating. "You have made me the happiest man in the world, my dear," he said, much to Samantha's disbelief. "I confess that waiting for you to name the day is becoming increasingly irksome."

Germaine stood on tiptoe to embrace him. Through

stunned eyes Samantha saw them kiss. Blindly, she turned to rush from the room, but then she halted and stood her ground. Never would she allow this man with whom she had fallen hopelessly in love to realize how deeply she was hurt. Plainly, he regarded her as a convenient bedfellow and nothing more, someone who could be lied to and betrayed without a thought. She raised her golden head proudly, and across Germaine's dark one Mark looked up and met her eyes. The expression in his own was tense, but meaningless. Was he trying to assure her that his marriage would make no difference to their relationship? God in heaven, what sort of man was he—harsh and uncaring enough to disregard her feelings, and at the same time, sufficiently gullible to be fooled by devious little Germaine? Exasperated and cut to the quick by his unthinking cruelty, Samantha forced a bright smile to her lips, "Congratulations, Mark," she said. "I must start planning the wedding breakfast with Mrs. Thomas right away, since Germaine has no parents to do the wedding honors."

She turned away then, unable to face the eloquent look in his eyes—a look that was plainly one of desire, but inflamed her to anger this time. Never again would she let him make love to her. Never again would she give her body to him in glorious abandon, never again allow him the satisfaction of knowing that she was his any time he chose to take her. The moment Germaine became his wife, he would forget all about that night in the summer house and the hours before the library fire, and even about last night in his deep feather bed. It would be Germaine who would share that bed with him—never she, Samantha Kimbolt, who wanted him in spite of everything, and hated herself for loving him.

Patience went upstairs to collect their wraps, and when she returned it was Richard who took Germaine's cashmere shawl and placed it around her shoulders. He was rewarded with a smile of thanks that seemed to hold that potent, personal quality which was so singularly her own and was reserved only for men. Patience scarcely won a glance from her. Samantha offered her cousin a special smile and thanks for her hospitality as she turned to accept her own wrap. It was a long cloak made in the same peacock blue silk of her gown, lined with emerald satin, and when she had donned it earlier that evening she had felt self-confident and elegant and poised. But no longer. Her heart was numbed and her limbs moved awkwardly as though she were a stranger

to her own body. She was anxious to be gone, to be alone in her bedroom at Hawksmere, where she could bury her face in her pillow and give way to grief.

Someone placed her cloak about her shoulders and she realized in surprise that it was her uncle—the courteous host assisting a far from welcome guest to depart. As he did so, his fingers touched her neck. She felt their coldness and was repelled by it. She shivered, and the cloak slid to the floor.

Mark picked it up and replaced it around her shoulders. She heard him whispering in her ear, "Trust me, Samantha. Trust me and go on loving me."

The others were exchanging farewells and beneath the sound of their voices she whispered violently, "Never! Never again in this life will I love you, Mark Chaters."

"Oh, but you will, my lovely amber goddess, because you cannot help yourself. You will be unable to keep away from me, as I will be unable to keep away from you. You know that."

Damn his teasing smile! Damn his arrogance and his confidence. Damn him for making her fall in love with him, and then for breaking her heart. Damn him for looking at her the way he was looking at her now, when only a few minutes ago he had openly embraced Germaine. He had the power to inflame her passionate blood, which even now stirred in response to his nearness. She was mesmerized by him, and totally entrapped by his devastating physical appeal. Was there to be no release from this enslavement?

She turned her back on him abruptly and, to her fury, she heard his quiet laughter and his voice murmuring, "Don't try to run away from me, Samantha. You know you will never escape me."

It was a silent party that returned to Hawksmere. Richard sat morosely in a corner of the carriage and Samantha stared unseeingly into the moonlit night. Germaine was curled up in a tight ball within the curve of Mark's arm, her head on his shoulder.

Samantha kept her eyes studiously averted until they reached home. Richard helped her down from the carriage. Without a backward glance she swept indoors. If Mark was carrying his wife-to-be into the abbey, just as he had carried Samantha herself only last night, she did not want to see it.

Within the vast hall, a figure emerged from the shadows; it was Alice, who had waited up for her mistress.

Germaine gushed with gratitude as she spotted her maid.

"My dear, how tired you must be!" she exclaimed. "You must go to bed the minute you have helped me to undress."

Alice's face was taut and pale. Samantha could see only too plainly that the girl was upset. Had she been waiting here by the door all evening long? Waiting, not for her mistress's return, but for Master Richard's? Emotionally spent herself, Samantha went toward the stairs, but not before she saw Germaine reach up and kiss Mark. She turned away as she saw the French girl yawn elaborately, and start ahead of Alice up the stairs as she bid Mark goodnight.

"I am so very tired and fatigued, my love," she said over her shoulder. "All I desire now is to be alone and to sleep for hours and hours." She seemed to be intent on making it clear to her fiancé that no matter how much he might be hoping to anticipate their wedding night, she was too virtuous to consent. Exasperated by the pair of them, Samantha stalked upstairs without bidding anyone goodnight, her cloak billowing behind her.

That night she locked her bedroom door for the first time, not because she thought Mark would try to come to her, but because she wanted to be certain that no one would disturb her for any reason. To ensure that Germaine should not invade her privacy on any trivial whim, she locked the communicating door also, then flung herself down upon the bed in the darkened room and let her pent up tears flow, her silk gown crumpled beneath her.

Richard lingered downstairs until everyone had gone. In particular, he wanted to stay out of Alice's way. His former mistress's covert glance had not escaped him. He was sorry about Alice, but there it was—a man could not love the same woman forever, though in his present mood he was convinced that he could if that woman were Germaine.

Her announcement at Uncle Simeon's about the wedding had startled him. Never before had she openly referred to her coming marriage, and when he was alone with her, which was more often than anyone suspected and not nearly so often as he wished, she often made it clear that she preferred him to Mark. In the sweet-smelling hayloft he would wait for her, impatient for the sight of her strolling along, twirling a parasol and pretending to be out for a solitary walk. Sweet Germaine, she hated walking, as she hated any form of exercise or discomfort. She took her afternoon constitutionals

only to convince the household that she was doing as Mark wished. Since he was at his boatyard every weekday, and the domestic staff was occupied with daily chores, there was nothing to keep Germaine from meeting him in the hayloft. They would lie together in the soft hay, forgetting the world.

Samantha could not know, as busy as she always was with household responsibilities. But Alice was becoming an anxiety. Beneath her incessant pleading, Richard had begun to sense a bitter resentment, and when he offered her a generous sum of money to remember him by, she had almost flung it in his face.

One night she had slipped into his bed. He had not heard her creep into the room, and had stirred only when her exploring fingers stole between his thighs, gently massaging him until he was erect and hard. But he could not, in all good conscience, let her continue. He did have some thought about what he was doing to her, and so he turned her away. She sobbed then, but she would not accept comforting, and ran from his room in her shift trailing her clothes behind her.

How could he give her hope? He was obsessed by Germaine, that gossamer figure in her near transparent gown, almost unreal in her ethereal beauty. Unlike Alice, of course, who was all too solid a testimony to reality. She had stepped from life belowstairs to life abovestairs, and she wore her prestigious new position of lady's maid with an air. Richard, on the other hand, had been demoted from reigning Kimbolt to a mere overseer—a poor relation. He didn't like the thought of that. Although he wished Alice well, he no longer wanted to bed her. She reminded him keenly that stepping up or down in the world is often a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

But he could not think about Alice now. He had something far more important on his mind. He gave the household an hour in which to settle down, then he crept quietly upstairs and into Germaine's room.

Not for the first time, Samantha sought refuge in work. Routine responsibilities claimed her for the most part, but whenever she could snatch a moment, she would return to the library and continue dusting the great volumes, hoping to find the rest of Uncle Jonothan's confession. So far, she had met with no success.

The library had become the place to which she escaped when Germaine's demands became too tiresome, and she had

been at particular pains to avoid the girl since their evening at Uncle Simeon's house. Now Germaine seemed to take a special pleasure in talking about her upcoming wedding.

Ten days after that fateful dinner, she had complained that Victoria Turner was hindered by the arrears of her work and could not begin work on the gown.

"Is this not horrible, Samantha?" she pouted, her hands busily arranging a box of hairpins on her dressing table. "*Mon Dieu*, Mark is growing difficult. *Je t'assure*, he would be sharing my bed already if I would allow it. Meanwhile, I confess it amuses me to keep him waiting for that. Such waiting does a man no harm, and denial only makes him want a woman more. Do you not agree?"

Samantha tried to contain her rage, tried to tell herself that this—this *person*—did not matter at all, but to no avail. "I know nothing of such things, being unwed," she murmured, keeping her eyes on her mending. "As it is now, you have the whip hand. I imagine you enjoy that."

"Any woman who is clever makes quite sure she always has it, Samantha dear," Germaine responded with a playful grin.

The conversation lingered in Samantha's mind as she settled down to work in the library. She seemed unable to stay away from this room. Perched on the library steps, she avoided looking at the fur rug on which she and Mark had lain in the firelight, for it conjured up all too vividly the wild passion they had shared. She had to stop thinking about that, she told herself. There was more to life than pining after a manipulative, betraying, damnably attractive male.

Briskly, she set to work. Dusting the endless volumes was tedious, since she was attempting to sort out the books according to topic as well as clean them. The entire collection had somehow been jumbled haphazardly; volumes of sermons were intermingled with poetry, Greek philosophers with Shakespeare and Voltaire, biography with classical novels. And dusting was the least of her effort. Gilt edges had to be cleaned, leather bindings polished, and shelves wiped thoroughly before she replaced the books in some semblance of order.

Samantha was gratified if she managed to get through a dozen books in an hour, and the work was not exactly the most stimulating she had ever done. As she happened to glance out the window, book in hand, she was surprised to see Uncle Simeon wandering by himself. The man did turn up at the most unexpected moments! As might have been antici-

pated, he was inspecting the wall that was now repaired. Mark had set a crew of workmen to patch it not three days since.

She climbed down from the ladder and opened the window, calling a pleasant good day to her uncle. He turned with a frown, acknowledging her greeting with his customary reluctance.

"I hope you are reassured, Uncle Simeon," she smiled, indicating the wall behind him.

"About what, niece?"

"About there being no illegal activities here at Hawksmere." She tried, but found she could not keep a touch of mockery out of her voice. Nor did she really want to.

"I am glad to see," he remarked stiffly, "that Mr. Chaters has acted on my advice." Turning on his heel, he walked away without another word. Samantha smothered her amusement and went back to work.

She had not been at her task more than ten minutes when she took down a book that fell open in her hand. Several pieces of folded paper fluttered out, and her heart gave a little leap of excitement as she glimpsed Uncle Jonothan's handwriting. She was about to read them when there came a tap on the door, and without waiting for a summons, Alice entered.

Before she could spot Samantha perched on the steps, the paper was out of sight, the book closed.

"Ah, there you are," Alice said amiably as she spied Samantha. "M'mselle asked me to find you. She wishes you to accompany her to Folkestone. I have already ordered the carriage." The girl's composure seemed to have increased with her new domestic status; she was more self-assured than ever.

"Then I am afraid it must wait while I change. Meanwhile, tell mademoiselle that I will be ready as soon as possible." She rubbed her hands on her apron and tucked her prize book under her arm.

"I shouldn't take too long about it, Miss Samantha," Alice threw over her shoulder when she was halfway out the door. "She dislikes being kept waiting."

Ignoring the girl's comment, Samantha waited for the door to close, then extracted the paper from her book. She was naturally impatient to read her new installments, but Germaine's whims always demanded prompt satisfaction. She hurried upstairs and once again concealed her uncle's confes-

sion in her ancient valise. The original sheet was there, safe and sound, but she locked the closet door to be sure this time and put the key in her reticule.

Germaine's small foot was tapping impatiently when Samantha descended. She smiled amiably, made no apology for keeping the French girl waiting, and stepped into the carriage after her. She had chosen a deep maroon velvet traveling skirt with a contrasting rose satin bodice. The costume set off her milky white skin and the shimmering pile of her blond hair to perfection. She had swept up her tresses under a bandeau, which was attractive and sensible for traveling, as well as being much in fashion.

Germaine sat with hands folded upon the handle of her neatly rolled parasol, gazing at the countryside for a long time before bothering to speak. When she did, it was to compliment Samantha, somewhat coldly, upon her dress.

"Your wardrobe seems quite extensive," she commented acidly. "Victoria Turner has certainly gone to great pains for you."

"She did so at Mark's orders. He wanted me to equip myself more elegantly to please your fastidious eye."

"Then you carried out his orders excessively well. He seems to have been most generous with you." She sniffed and turned back to the window.

"He was extremely so."

"I wonder why."

Samantha ignored the inference in her voice, and Germaine eyed her ensemble and matching Morocco slippers once again.

"Mrs. Turner is certainly talented, with a good sense of fashion. I believe we pass through Hythe en route to Folkestone, do we not? If so, we will call upon her when we return, to inquire about my trousseau." She arranged the skirt of her own peach silk costume. With a sidelong glance, she added, "You see I am heeding your advice about it being unwise to keep a man like Mark waiting."

"I don't think I said anything like that."

"You certainly suggested it," Germaine laughed lightly. "Come, what is wrong? Your face would be appropriate at a funeral, not a lovely outing! Do not look so downcast! The sun is shining and we will enjoy ourselves in Folkestone, *bien sûr*."

Germaine chatted away for the rest of the journey, all her moodiness now vanished as they proceeded along the Leas

down to Folkestone harbor. As Samantha had expected, their destination was Mark's boatyard, and though she was anxious about meeting the man who had the power to exasperate, fascinate, confuse and disturb her all at the same time, her heart leaped at the thought of seeing him.

As she gazed around the large boatyard, Germaine made her fastidious way over the cobblestones, lifting her skirts to step over tarred ropes. Neither of them was adequately attired for such a place, and their clothing won them both a good deal of attention. Many workmen looked extremely interested at this vision in their midst. Samantha was drawn into the excitement of the yard—the noise and the hammering, the smell of pitch and brine and the roar of the sea beyond the harbor wall all contributed to the atmosphere of the place. There was a feeling of adventure here. She could well imagine Mark in this environment, for it was a powerful world, one of strength and sinew, a world in which Germaine, picking her way along distastefully, was totally out of place.

Samantha hurried after her to catch up, and as she made for the harbor wall, she saw two figures in the near distance, watching a newly arrived fishing vessel in the process of tying up. She recognized them as André Devereaux and Patience.

Her first impulse was to hurry across to greet them, but something in their attitude made her pause. They were standing close together holding hands, and seemed completely absorbed, as if they were unaware of everything but their clandestine meeting. Why else should they choose Folkestone, well outside her father's parish? Plainly, they had met here to avoid Uncle Simeon's eagle eye.

Samantha's heart went out to the bereaved doctor and the plain, lonely young woman who was so starved for affection. She turned away discreetly, and as she did so, her heart began to pound, for Mark was striding across the boatyard. His splendid body was clad in tough leather working breeches and a cotton shirt that was open to the waist. His broad chest—that chest she had smothered with kisses during the act of love—was covered with a fine sheen of perspiration. She could even recall the texture of the curly rust-colored hair upon it. That fine body belonged to *her*, and it caused her nothing but pain to see it walking straight for Germaine. Mark took his betrothed's hands, asking what had brought her to see him so unexpectedly. Samantha could read nothing but genuine delight in his voice.

"Oh, *chéri*," Germaine declared, round-eyed, "I want so

much to see this exciting place. And are *all* these vessels yours? Did you build each and every one? How wonderful, and how clever!"

With an indulgent smile, Mark told her that many had been built before he entered the business. "But yet, of course, the newer ones were built to my own designs. My latest three-masted lugger is just docking in the harbor," he went on. "Come, I will take you to see her. But first you must visit my office."

"Samantha, too. We must not forget Samantha."

Seeing Samantha standing to one side, Mark's face lit up, but only with the warmth one showed to a friend. Only in her imagination had something else been there. And even if it really had existed, she thought unhappily, he would conceal it for Germaine's benefit. An unfaithful husband hides his interest in another woman from his wife because he is confident that he can pursue his mistress later in secret.

Just how mistaken he was, he would soon discover. Samantha knew that her willpower could be strong when she needed it, and this strength now enabled her to meet him with a cool smile and a polite inclination of the head, both so neatly presented that amusement sparked in his eyes. This annoyed her considerably.

She turned her back on him and walked away, strolling toward the harbor wall, alone. But the next moment, his hand was beneath her elbow. "Let me help you across these cobblestones—they are slippery, and not meant for a lady's dainty slippers." She saw then that his other hand was beneath Germaine's elbow, and bitterness welled up in her.

She jerked her arm away. "I can manage, thank you," she muttered, and then she heard his quiet laughter and knew that he was looking down with that infuriating smile of his.

He led them up the stairs of the boatyard offices and down a long corridor until they came to his private quarters. Even this room reflected his personality. There were books and mariner's charts, framed maps, seascapes, and boat-building plans laid out on a large table beneath a window.

While Germaine curled up in a large leather chair and accepted a cup of coffee, Samantha looked about her, taking in each facet of the room where Mark worked.

"How wonderful," she exclaimed, holding up a ship's model that had been perched on a shelf above his desk. "Did you make this?"

Mark came around beside her and took the model in his

hands lovingly. "My father helped me with it, but I did most of the work myself, yes. I was a boy of eight then. I am glad it gives you pleasure."

Germaine seemed disinterested, so Samantha went on to a quadrant and a compass standing on the mantelshelf. "Tell me about these," she asked.

"Those were my father's, and he left them to me with strict instructions that I was to use them often and well. We are a seafaring family, you see, and any Chater who couldn't read a map or live on the water would be a disgrace to the ancestors."

Samantha laughed in spite of herself, her antagonism subsiding. Even the hurt he had inflicted was momentarily lulled by a renewal of kinship between them. It was evident she understood his feelings about family, and equally evident that he enjoyed sharing the memories with her. Theirs was the kinship of a man and woman who not only understood each other, but admired, respected, and yes, loved each other. During that magic hour in Mark's office, as he warmed to her questions and told her of his life at sea, a new bond was struck between them.

"To understand ships," Mark explained, looking out the window to the lugger just coming into port, "the Chaters always insisted that a man had to get to know the feel of a deck beneath his feet, the art of navigation, and the purpose of every part of a vessel. Only then could he climb back on land and build a boat himself. I confess, the tides and the changes of the moon still move me."

Samantha felt that spark of closeness once again. Moments in which a man and woman could talk together without emotional barriers were important, even revealing. She was almost unaware of Germaine's boredom and ignored the slight sounds of yawning coming from the leather armchair in the corner.

But at last Germaine grew too impatient. "May I go aboard your ship, dear Mark? Is she big? Really big? Big enough to sail to the New World and bring back rich cargoes?" As always, the French girl's petulance had vanished with another lightning change of mood. Samantha wished this time could be prolonged, but of course that would be impossible now. Just when she and Mark were understanding one another in a way they had not previously. The attraction between them had not been solely physical, that was clear to Samantha, as she knew it was to Mark.

"Come, now, we will see the lugger," he agreed, pulling Germaine from her seat with both strong hands. "I think you will enjoy it." He turned and saw the expression on Samantha's face, taking in her disappointment completely. "You would make a good wife for a sailor," he said pensively, "or for a man interested in ships."

The compliment brought warm color to her face, even though his words indicated no more than his appreciation of her interest. And now all his attentions were focused on Germaine.

"Now we will go aboard, my love," he said as they walked across the yard to the huge ship. "Here, let me carry you up. Samantha may be independent and believe she has no need of my help, but you are not so foolish, are you, *chérie*?"

In that one sentence, Mark had destroyed the entire hour they had spent in his office. Samantha could not tell which of the two, Mark or Germaine, she would prefer to shove in the water.

A crowd had gathered to watch the ship tie up, but as they drew near, Samantha saw that the attention of some was focused on the smaller fishing vessel, now unloading at the dock. A handful of people, unmistakably French refugees, climbed the steps leading up from the quayside, in varying stages of fatigue. At the top, watching the proceedings, were Devereaux and Patience.

Mark put Germaine down and began pushing his way through the crowd, making a path for them to follow, but Germaine fell behind and seized Samantha's arm.

"Look!" she whispered. "Devereaux! He is counting the émigrés coming ashore. Remember what I told you about him? He will note the name of that vessel and heaven help it next time it reaches French shores! Pray God, Mark's new lugger has no illegal passengers aboard. Devereaux is a spy, I swear it!"

Samantha did not want to believe Germaine, but she was frightened even so. If Devereaux were a spy, and Patience did not know, she could be unwittingly involved in trouble.

"Go ahead with Mark," she urged Germaine, waving her on. "Make the excuse that I met my cousin and stopped to greet her. Say anything whilst I get them away, then I will wait at the boatyard until you return."

Hurrying to the other vessel, she greeted Patience joyfully, and Devereaux, almost as if he were a long, lost friend, linking her arms in both of theirs and drawing them back with

her along the harbor wall. "My goodness!" she exclaimed, "what a lucky chance to meet like this on the very afternoon that Germaine and I came to see Mark's boatyard! You must join us," she insisted, dragging them along, much to their mutual consternation. "I know you will be more than welcome." What to do with them when they reached the boatyard and neither Mark nor Germaine were there, she had no time to think. The important thing was to get them away from Mark's newly arrived vessel in case that had also brought fugitives.

André Devereaux was trying to release his arm from her grasp.

"If you will excuse me, Miss Kimbolt . . ."

She saw him looking over his shoulder, so she tightened her hold and raced on. "What a lucky meeting! It seems so long since we visited the vicarage."

By now they had descended from the wall and reached the cindered area where carriages waited. To the left of it was the entrance to the Chaters boatyards, with Hawksmere's best landau beside the gates. She saw Thomas holding the horses' heads, and a drab vehicle not far away, but no sign of Uncle Simeon's somber coach in which Patience was permitted to take occasional journeys.

"Please," she insisted, "you will take tea with us, will you not?"

The doctor extricated his arm from hers. "That is most kind of you, Miss Kimbolt, but I have a prior commitment." Patience said nothing. Her color was high and Samantha guessed that being discovered in a secret rendezvous with a man had embarrassed her. Poor, dear Patience, Samantha thought. She is in love with Devereaux and can see no farther than her affection will allow her.

And what sort of man *was* the doctor? Was it possible that Germaine was right, and that he was involved in illicit operations on behalf of the French Commune? Was it really likely that a man who had married into one of his country's most noble families could ally himself with the party at whose hands they had suffered?

But who could be sure if he had told the truth about losing his family? And who could tell whether he really was struggling to make a new life in a new country, or was instead spying on English vessels to detect those smuggling condemned aristocrats out of France? He had certainly been paying careful attention to those weary people coming

ashore. Had he been trying to identify any of them from descriptions sent to him secretly, enlisting her cousin's help with some fabricated tale?

Samantha was too bewildered to think clearly. She looked back at the refugees now standing in a huddled group, abandoned to whatever fate might have in store for them in this alien land. Once brought ashore, those who had neither relatives nor friends to turn to simply had to fend for themselves, regardless of the fact that most of them were ignorant of the language and undoubtedly had few possessions or money with which to establish themselves. She felt impelled to go to them, and as she hesitated, Devereaux pulled his arm away and went striding back. A moment later he was talking to the group, obviously questioning them. Was he trying to find out the name of the skipper who brought them across, or the name of the owner of the vessel who had arranged their passage?

Then he gestured toward the shabby carriage standing alongside the elegant one from Hawksmere. Patience watched him closely, then grabbed Samantha's arm in anger.

"Why did you interfere?" she asked hotly.

"With what?" Samantha looked blank.

"With us!" Patience whirled away, flinging over her shoulder, "Go home! Go back to Hawksmere and forget you ever saw us together, I beg you!"

She went swiftly to Devereaux's side and took the arm of one of the weary refugees, and her manner was concerned. Neither she nor the doctor took any further notice of Samantha as they led the group to the shabby vehicle and helped them inside.

Samantha watched them drive away, then walked slowly back, but she was only halfway to the harbor wall when a horseman came riding by, reined at the foot of the steps and dismounted. He was elegantly dressed in breeches of the finest doeskin, and though he no longer wore the black eye patch, the marks of her whiplash were still visible on his face.

Samantha halted, anxious to avoid him and glad he had not recognized her from the back. She wanted no further encounters with Jake Dempster.

As he tied up his horse, Samantha saw Germaine and Mark coming back along the wall. By the time they had reached the steps, Dempster was already climbing them. At that very moment, Germaine's parasol, which she was swinging carelessly, tumbled down. Dempster reached out to catch it, but

Mark was too quick for him. He snatched it up hastily and then helped Germaine to descend, handing her the parasol with a gallant flourish. Jake Dempster stood aside at the foot of the steps, politely doffing his hat as Germaine passed. Mark acknowledged the man with a curt nod, but Germaine ignored him.

"Ah, there you are, Samantha," Mark said, catching up to her. "Why did you not go with us to the ship? She is a fine vessel and I am proud of her. I would have enjoyed showing you around below deck. Not Germaine's cup of tea, I'm afraid."

Samantha glanced at the French girl as she moved away from Mark's side and strolled over to the waiting landau, tossing her parasol on the seat. "I will have no need for that until the return journey," she said as she rejoined them.

Samantha caught a glimpse of Mark out of the corner of her eye. He was looking at Germaine with an indulgent eye, the eye of a man who is blind to everything except the one he loves. Samantha was upset and thoroughly out of patience with him. She doubted whether he even heard her talking about a chance meeting with her cousin—but what did that matter now?

Chapter 18



On the way home, Samantha told Germaine everything she had seen. "I know why Devereaux was waiting down by the harbor, and it makes nonsense of your suspicions."

Germaine raised one delicate eyebrow. "Then pray tell me why was he there?"

"To help those unfortunate people."

"Did he tell you so?"

Samantha shifted her weight away from Germaine in annoyance. "It was obvious, I tell you," she insisted. "He and my cousin are in it together."

"In it? That sounds highly suspect."

"André Devereaux is a doctor! He was there to look after them."

"I see." Germaine twirled the stem of her parasol on the carriage floor. Then she turned and patted Samantha's arm. "I truly hope you are right and that I am wrong. You must forgive me for being afraid, but things have made me so. I cannot help but wonder about Devereaux."

Samantha continued to admire the view, hoping to close the conversation, but Germaine was impervious to her mood. "Forget it now," she said happily. "Think of it no more. Soon

we will be in Hythe and I want to call on Mrs. Turner. Let us think about lovely things now, like my trousseau."

Having the knife turned in her personal wound scarcely made Samantha happy, but she could think of no excuse to avoid the visit. To see Germaine's bridal gown in the making and to listen to discussions about the lingerie and nightgowns to delight her husband's eye would be more than she could bear.

"I have a headache, I fear, so you will not object if I remain in the carriage? The fresh air should help to clear it."

"No, no, no! I want your comments and suggestions. Have I not already remarked on your excellent dress sense?"

So there was no way to avoid the visit. By the time they turned into Hythe's main street, Samantha had resigned herself to it, and as the landau slowed down, she sighed and opened the door. As she stepped out, she jolted bolt upright in surprise, for outside Victoria Turner's door stood Simeon's coach.

It would have to be Patience, of course, Samantha reasoned, visiting the dressmaker without her father's knowledge. She must have left Devereaux and the refugees and was now on her way back to Rye, where she had stopped to do some secret shopping. If she had been anxious about her father discovering that she was seeing André Devereaux on the sly, she must be doubly so about a trip to Victoria Turner's shop. Her father did not only disapprove of spending money and of wearing fine clothes, he also felt that Victoria Turner was an instrument of the devil. Surely he would not countenance his daughter spending time in the company of a woman he loathed.

But here was Cousin Patience, no doubt, indulging in some illicit spending, though the allowance her father made her was too meager to purchase much.

Samantha's unwillingness to accompany Germaine gave way to pleasure at the prospect of patching up any misunderstanding she might have had with Patience. After Thomas had helped Germaine down from the coach, she hurried ahead to the shop while, behind her, Germaine paused to study the bottle-glass windows, exclaiming over the items on display.

"Brussels lace and silks from Lyons! And French gloves as fine as any in Paris! How wonderful to find such wares in a small place like this!"

Samantha paid no heed, flung open the door, and then

stopped short. She heard a voice raised in anger from within, a voice she had not heard in quite some time, but one that she knew as well as her own brother's. The woman standing in Mrs. Turner's shop turned around.

Samantha was face to face with Aunt Charlotte!

"My dear niece," said her aunt calmly, "have you relapsed into hoydenish behavior again? I thought I had cured you of that, yet now I see you fling open the door just as you did when young!"

Samantha was astonished, but neither Aunt Charlotte nor Victoria Turner seemed in the least ruffled by her unexpected appearance, despite the fact that a heated altercation had evidently just taken place between them. But why would Charlotte Kimbolt, who had not purchased a new dress or hat in decades, be haggling with a modiste?

Before she had the opportunity to make a remark, the door opened and Germaine flounced in. As usual, her entrance made a marked impression, but while Victoria Turner's reaction was one of admiration, Aunt Charlotte merely looked startled. She seemed even more so when Samantha introduced Germaine as Mark Chater's fiancée. Even the French girl's dazzling smile had no effect on her. Samantha knew her aunt was summing up this young woman as being far too fragile and too decorative to be the future mistress of Hawksmere, a position that should have gone to a Kimbolt. To forestall any acid comment, Samantha said quickly, "I had no idea you were in the vicinity, Aunt Charlotte. I saw Uncle Simeon's carriage outside and presumed that Patience must be here."

"Your cousin, to her shame, deserted me most inconsiderately. I arrived only yesterday and what must she do this afternoon but disappear after luncheon without any indication of where she was going! *Most* discourteous, when I have traveled so far."

"What brings you to Rye, Aunt?" Samantha asked, coming to her side. "I thought this part of the country held little appeal for you."

Charlotte's glance said plainly that her niece had no right to inquire. Samantha would never have dared to do so in the past, but now she was her own woman, an independent soul, a fact her aunt did not fail to observe. The woman's raised eyebrows were most expressive.

"I admit it is long since I visited these parts, but at my age a

woman has a desire to see a brother and a niece with whom she has lost touch. I will visit Hawksmere within the next day or two, even though it is now occupied by an usurper."

Germaine's voice cut in, "And I shall have pleasure in receiving you, Madame." She spoke with an air of one who was already mistress there. "I will see that an invitation is sent to you in the not-too-distant future."

Her cool little nod of dismissal could not have been more crushing. Samantha saw her aunt stiffen, then with an angry step the woman marched to the door, a demonstration of indignation that was entirely lost on both Germaine and the dressmaker as they retired to the inner salon.

Not until Samantha was in bed that night did she have an opportunity to look at her latest cache of pages written by Uncle Jonothan. Her eyes grew wide with astonishment as she read:

I have made so many attempts to record everything, failing each time and committing all to the fire, that I fear the task will never be accomplished. The knowledge that so long as I remain silent I am safe has been my undoing. But conscience tortures me, although now it is too late to right a wrong. I can never forget, nor find any escape from remorse, even in self-sought oblivion.

I wish Matt and not I had inherited the abbey. He loved the place, but he loved Clarissa more, and so it was I who became master of Hawksmere without any inclination for the rôle, nor the ability to handle it. My share of the Kimbolt fortune dwindled rapidly through my own mismanagement, I have never deserved the protection of a brother like Simeon, nor the love of a wife like Ruth. I loved her as I loved no woman before. I loved her, and I killed her, and Mark knows. I saw condemnation in his eyes before he turned on his heel and walked out of the abbey and never came back. Thank God Simeon stood by me, and helped me. Once Hawksmere was a place to be proud of, but after I inherited . . .

The page finished in mid-sentence, leaving Samantha totally frustrated. She read the sheets again, folded them, and hid them away.

She had the beginning and the end of the confession, but not the middle, and knew she would never rest until she

found it. She blew out her candle and the words played over and over in her head. It seemed impossible to settle down to sleep, but after a restless half hour, she began to drift off.

It was then that she heard the sound—a distant door closing, then silence. It meant nothing, of course. A servant checking that all was locked for the night. She dismissed it and slid down beneath the bedcovers, falling asleep almost immediately, only to be jerked awake by other sounds—nearer, this time. They came from Germaine's room. Murmurs, the creaking of a bed, inarticulate cries—sounds with which she was all too familiar and which had only one meaning.

Quickly, she pulled the covers over her head, but she could not blot out those sounds. She could only recall the echo of Germaine's words—*"I declare he would be sharing my bed already if he had his way"*—and now he was doing so.

Clamping her fists over her ears, Samantha buried herself more deeply. She lay in a stifling, hot, unhappy world in which one emotion dominated—a longing to run away. Now that Mark had abandoned her for Germaine, to stay beneath the same roof would be intolerable.

Not even her desire to find the remainder of Uncle Jonathan's confession could keep her here now. Whatever had happened at Hawksmere in the past did not concern her, and the sooner she turned her back on the place, the wiser she would be.

Dick would have to be responsible for himself, get himself out of his own scrapes, or go with her. The peak smuggling period was nearly over; now was a good time for him to leave and seek gainful employment elsewhere. The best way to convince him would be to tell him that Mark and Germaine were now lovers and so his obsession with the French girl would get him nowhere. Mark had far more to offer than any misguided youth, even if his pockets *were* lined with smugglers' gold.

Within the stifling bedclothes, the silence weighed oppressively on her. After a while she was forced to emerge for air. She lay on her back, breathing deeply, thankful that all was now silent in the next room. But for how long? She was well acquainted with Mark's virility. Even to think of it stirred her blood. Why should she lie here in torment? She would escape from this room and, until she could also escape from Hawksmere, she would occupy another.

Gathering up her bed quilt, she flung it around her and fled

barefoot along the abbey's silent corridors, as far as possible from the room where her lover now lay with another woman. At last she tumbled into a distant, disused guest room, closed the door firmly behind her, and fell upon the empty bed in a paroxysm of weeping.

Daylight brought with it the realization that flight would not be easy. She had not saved enough of her salary to tide her over for more than a week or two, and though her fine new clothes would fetch good money, never would she take a single item that had been paid for by Mark Chaters. So what could she do, where could she go? To Aunt Charlotte at Uncle Simeon's rectory, begging to return to London with her? Never that! She would just have to think of something else, and then act on it.

Rising early, she aired and cleaned the room and then transferred all her possessions from her former bedchamber. That accomplished, she let domestic routine take over—supervision of the household, the checking of linen presses, and then the household accounts. Martha Piper was going through the linen when Samantha came to present the laundry lists and kitchen accounts, and was treated to a few choice words from the housekeeper on Alice's airs and graces.

"Considers herself too good for the likes of us in the kitchen nowadays, she does. Keeps rubbing it in about her father having been butler here and higher than the lot of us, and how she's going to rise higher than a lady's maid one day and surprise the lot of us."

Samantha had schooled herself to ignore Martha Piper's prattle, but this morning the woman was in a particularly garrulous mood. She had accepted Samantha at last, and even seemed grateful for the new household routines. She was also instinctively aware of Samantha's feeling about Germaine and was eager to comment on the fact that mademoiselle was sleeping late. After a night of love with Mark, that was hardly surprising, taunted Samantha's unhappy heart. Then Martha added, with a meaningful glance, "She's very demanding, isn't she? My word, she must've been waited on hand and foot in that chateau she lived in! Mademoiselle de la Roche seems to think she can come here and pick up where she left off, if you know what I mean."

Samantha knew well enough what she meant, but made no

answer. She finished her chores early and extricated herself from Piper's presence, deciding she should escape from the abbey for as long as possible. She needed to calm her thoughts and emotions with fresh air and exercise, so she ordered Vagabond, the horse that had brought her safely home from the fog-bound marsh, to be saddled. The day was warm and sunny, ideal for a long and leisurely ride; she would not have to face Mark and the girl whose bed he had shared last night until dinnertime. By then, please God, her own unhappy heart would have been stilled and her urgent blood have ceased its longing for him.

Giving Vagabond his head, she let him take her where he willed, which happened to be across fields where Richard was at work. There was certainly an improvement in the farm these days—well-kept sheep, grazing pastures refertilized, hedges neatly laid, ditches cleared, barns and outhouses repaired, shearing sheds to be proud of. Mark had employed a regiment of men to restore order, and Dick had done his share manfully. She had good reason to be proud of the way he had knuckled under.

He smiled and waved as he spotted her, the sun shining on his handsome young face, and it was then that Samantha really hated Germaine, for the happiness in her brother's face would quickly fade once he knew that Mark now shared the girl's bed.

When he came running, calling to her to halt, Samantha did so, but decided not to bring up the topic of their departure from Hawksmere. The moment was not right.

Catching hold of Vagabond's bridle, he asked, "Did you know Aunt Charlotte has descended on Uncle Simeon's house?"

"Yes. How did you hear?" Samantha pulled on the reins to still her horse's eagerness.

"I saw Patience yesterday, driving with Dr. Devereaux; she said she was making her escape for the afternoon because Aunt Charlotte had arrived out of the blue. Mind you, I didn't think that was the only reason. I've seen her with Devereaux before. Naturally, I made no comment about that. I wouldn't welcome anyone questioning me about *my* affairs."

"Meaning you and Alice?"

"Lord, no, Sam. That's over. Has been ever since—"

"Ever since you met Germaine? Oh, Dick, don't be a fool!

She is not for you. Especially now." Samantha realized she had spoken without intending to, but now she had begun, there was no backing down.

He gave her a sharp glance. "Why? What do you mean?"

Samantha hesitated. She was distressed by the thought of hurting her brother, but it would be better if the young hothead knew the truth. Germaine had only been encouraging an enamored boy because it tickled her vanity to do so.

Samantha tried to keep her voice steady as she answered, "Because Mark is her lover now. I heard them together in the adjoining room last night."

When Richard stared at her, saying nothing, she burst out, "It is true, Dick, whether you want to believe it or not. So keep away from her, for your own sake. And don't underestimate Mark. Germaine belongs to him as much as if she were his wife already."

Choking on the words, she wheeled away at a gallop. Richard watched her go, his face a mixture of conflicting expressions.

Samantha rode long and hard, putting as much distance as possible between the abbey and herself. The sun was high when she passed through the village called Ham Street and then on to Lympne, where she stopped to refresh her horse and partake of coffee in the parlor of a wayside inn. After an ostler had helped to remount her, she was still in a truant mood and so eventually found herself in Saltwood, skirting the notorious but lovely castle. As she looked up to the hill rising out of Hythe etched against the sky, she could see the tall chimneys of Monks Hall. On an impulse, she decided to return home that way, if only to show Dempster, were he abroad, that she was unafraid of him. She could always brandish her riding crop, she thought with wry amusement.

There was no sign of the man as she approached the gates, but she did see an elegant phaeton driving out. To her surprise Alice's mother was seated within, looking very much at ease.

Samantha pulled onto the verge to let the vehicle pass, and as she did so, Victoria Turner commanded her driver to halt.

"Miss Kimbolt," she smiled, "this is an unexpected pleasure. You have ridden far."

"Yes, indeed," Samantha agreed, and then, as the conversation seemed to have no logical extension, she added, "I presume the owners of Monks Hall are in residence again."

At that, Mrs. Turner seemed faintly puzzled. "Dempster

told me they were Londoners who come here only occasionally," Samantha explained.

The woman nodded. "That is true. They are newly arrived for a prolonged visit. I have the privilege of serving the mistress of the house, who sends transport to collect me and to take me home—so gracious of her. She was a client of the modiste for whom I worked in London and I have been most fortunate in being favored with her patronage. We are both fortunate, are we not Miss Kimbolt? I came to this part of the world in reduced circumstances, just as you did, and we have both found security in serving people in high places."

If the words were intended to jar, they succeeded. The woman bowed, signaled to the driver, and left Samantha staring after her. There was something amiss here. Mrs. Turner might have been visiting Monks Hall for dress consultations, but it struck Samantha as odd that neither dress boxes nor rolls of material were in the carriage.

Samantha rode straight around to the stables as soon as she arrived back at Hawksmere. A stableboy came running and released her feet from the stirrups, caught the reins, then, before he could reach up to help her down, another man came around to the side of her horse and placed a hand on either side of her waist. It was Mark.

She unhooked her right leg from the pommel and accepted his help because she had no choice. The touch of his hands on her was as disturbing as ever, but when she tried to draw away from him, his grip tightened.

"You have ridden far, from the look of things." He put her on the ground but he would not let go of her.

"That is true. But a day in the open air never tires me." She shook her hair out and it fanned over her shoulders like rays of sunlight.

"I can believe that."

They were standing close together, his hands still on her waist. She was aware of his scrutiny, which seemed to take in every detail about her. Then he released her and asked abruptly, "Why have you moved into a different room?"

So Germaine had wasted no time in telling him that she was no longer within range of her bell.

She tilted her chin and answered, "Because I wished to. Why else?"

"Did you dislike the other one?"

"No."

"Then why give it up? And which have you chosen in preference?"

"A guest room in the west wing."

He answered thoughtfully, "If I wish, I can order you to return to the one you had previously, don't forget."

Indignation colored her cheeks. It was as if he enjoyed making her angry, simply to call forth this reaction.

"You could, since I am—as you now remind me—no more than one of your domestic staff. But I see no reason why you should. Am I failing in my duties? Have you cause for complaint, in any way? And since Alice is now Germaine's maid, she can be summoned instead of me." Samantha whirled away from him and started out of the stable.

As they crossed the front courtyard, she stopped short—so abruptly that Mark nearly knocked into her. "I gather Germaine has complained about my move?" she said between clenched teeth.

"Why should she not, since you are here to keep her company."

"Not at night, sir!"

He laughed in that maddening way of his. "I scarcely imagine that. You only enjoy male company at night, do you not, my witch?"

"Stop calling me that!"

"But why? It suits you. And it is how I think of you."

"You surprise me, sir. I have the distinct impression that you only think of me as a useful companion to your betrothed."

They were crossing the great hall now. Samantha took a step, then turned to face him. "Now, I will tell you something. I have no intention of dancing attendance upon that spoiled young woman any more. Dismiss me, if you wish. Send me packing! But tell me no more that she is in need of comfort, since you provide that so well yourself... especially at night!"

She gathered up her riding skirt and raced upstairs, fury in every step. Mark stared after her, his expression inscrutable, his figure turned to stone.

The nightgown lay in a gossamer heap on the carpet. Alice picked it up, marveling at the loveliness of it, but at the same time wondering why her mistress had cast it aside. The early spring night had not been warm and the only other reason for shedding her nightwear was a lover. Had the master of

Hawksmere been anticipating his wedding night? Alice's mouth curved indulgently, then drooped suddenly. It was a long time since she had been in bed with a lover and stark envy took over. Oh, Richard! Why did you suddenly grow tired of me?

Alice was experiencing the bitter hurt of rejection, and because Richard had been her first lover, she felt it even more deeply. It had to be Master Richard forever or no one, even though her mother had always declared that not only were there as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, but many a great deal better. Alice knew, however, that she would never want another man so much, and since the only way she could get him was by offering her body, she was convinced that this was the manner in which she would eventually win him back. So last night she had slipped along to his room again, after the abbey slept. He had turned her away the last time she had done this, but perhaps now he would feel differently, or so she hoped.

But last night he had not been in his room. He had been out somewhere—with the smugglers, perhaps, for the night had been dark. Tonight she would try again. She would slip into his room and into his bed, as she had done so many times before. And this time she knew she would be able to charm him and love him.

As she folded her mistress's nightgown, touching the transparent layers of chiffon and lace with reverent hands, she looked at the sleeping face on the pillow, beautified even more by the master's love. Envy stirred anew in Alice's mind. She herself had slept like this after Master Richard had bedded her, her body at peace and, on waking, it would be all aglow and often hungry for more. Then would come the tantalizing hours of waiting for night to return, the day passing in delicious anticipation.

She took the nightgown across the room and put it away. The sound of the drawer closing wakened mademoiselle, who stretched drowsily, pushing the bedclothes aside and so uncovering her naked body. Its loveliness was undeniable, but Alice knew that her own was as pretty—Master Richard had adored it often enough, and told her so. Then mademoiselle opened sleepy eyes, yawned, saw her maid, and smiled. It was the smile of a contented woman, satiated with love, a state with which Alice was well acquainted. She felt warmly sympathetic toward her mistress.

Solicitously, she took a satin peignoir from the closet and

brought it to the bed. "Your chocolate is by your bedside, m'amselle," she said. "Let me put this around you and then bank up your pillows."

Germaine sat up, her pretty breasts thrusting outward and upward, her smile dimpling as she looked at her maid's averted eyes.

"Are you shocked, Alice? Have you never slept in the nude?"

"Many times, m'amselle." She picked up the cup and saucer on their tray. "Pray drink your chocolate, or it will be cold."

As she leaned over the bed, she spotted something on the floor. Her lip began to tremble, and suddenly the cup was rattling in the saucer. Germaine looked up in surprise to see her maid staring at a man's handkerchief lying beside the bed. Germaine laughed lightly, assuming an air of guilt, tempered with definite enjoyment.

"Now do not be shocked, Alice. You know I am to wed your master, and soon, and what your mistress does is no concern of yours."

Alice stooped and picked up the kerchief. She had seen the initial embroidered in the corner many times. She had washed and ironed many of Richard's handkerchiefs.

"I am not in the least shocked, m'amselle," she announced stonily, "but I am surprised that Master Richard should be so careless."

Germaine paused, the cup of chocolate halfway to her mouth. "Don't be absurd, girl. Do you think I would admit a callow youth into my bed? You insult me. That handkerchief belongs to your master, and you will keep a still tongue in your head if you hope to remain here."

"This does not bear the master's initial, m'amselle. I am responsible for the laundry, and I know every piece of the master's linen and the same with Master Richard's. I never mix them up." Her face, temporarily blanched, now took on an angry color. "And I presume, m'amselle, your husband-to-be is aware that you are not a virgin. It might be wise to tell him, so that he will not be shocked on your wedding night."

"How dare you! You are dismissed, girl. You will pack your bag and leave Hawksmere at once."

"Oh no, I won't, m'amselle. You are not yet mistress here so you cannot dismiss anybody. And if you go complaining to the Master, I might be tempted to have a word with him myself."

She flounced to the door, and then looked back, a mixture of hatred and contempt in her face. "Enjoy your morning chocolate, m'amselle!"

Outside the room, Alice's brave front collapsed. She covered her face with her hands and wept. Behind her, she heard the French girl's bell ringing imperatively in the adjoining room, and the futility of the summons made her sob hysterically, half laughing, half crying.

But damn you, you foreign bitch! She moaned inwardly. Damn you for coming here and taking Master Richard away from me! I'll make you pay for it, that I will!

Chapter 19



Try as Samantha might to avoid all contact with Mark, chance meetings were inescapable. Sometimes she suspected that they were not always accidental, that Mark contrived to waylay her both indoors and out. Therefore, she was not surprised to come face to face with him in the library a day or two after their encounter in the stableyard. He had been waiting for her.

"I gather you spend a lot of time in this room," he said without any preliminary.

"And who told you that?" She swept past him and went to the desk, pretending to straighten things.

"Alice. She told me I could nearly always find you in the library when Mademoiselle de la Roche didn't want you." His glance was as penetrating as ever, his face as inscrutable. He would now be visiting Germaine's room nightly, Samantha mused unhappily. Mercifully, in her far distant bedroom, she could hear nothing of their lovemaking.

"And why should you want to find me?" she asked, adopting a pose of indifference.

He moved impatiently toward her. "You are avoiding me, Samantha."

"Are you surprised?" she asked sardonically. "And now, if you will excuse me, sir, I am in the process of dusting these great volumes—a task that demands a great deal of my time and attention." She stood stolidly behind the desk, looking down at the ink stains on the faded leather top. She was immediately reminded of her uncle's confession: *I killed my wife and Mark knows*. Had Uncle Jonothan hurled Ruth Kimbolt's body down through that gap in the wall? Had Mark witnessed the gruesome event?

And yet, Mark had left the wall unrepaired and allowed it to be made full use of, until Uncle Simeon made it plain that he was aware of the smuggling activities at the abbey. Mark Chaters became more of an enigma daily, haunting her and taunting her, drawing her to him against her will. Her glance lifted, settling on the window and then on the wall beyond.

She cleared her throat and said with a steadiness she did not feel, "I see you have repaired the wall. You acted very promptly following my uncle Simeon's warning. That is significant, is it not, after what occurred here one memorable night?"

"You admit it was memorable?" he said softly, coming up behind her. "For what do you remember it most, my sweet? For the unexpected activities of the Owlers, or for your own capture and seduction? There was ecstasy in that night." He brought his hand up and touched her hair. "And again here, before the fire, and yet again in my bed upstairs. No two lovers were ever bound so closely as you and I, my beloved, flesh of my flesh, heart of my heart. . . ."

She moved away swiftly, fighting her responsive heart, refusing to be influenced by his stirring voice or to be trapped by her own emotions.

"I remember it because I stumbled on the fact that there were smugglers at work here," she protested, shaking her head adamantly. "Smugglers who obviously looked to you to lead them."

"You have an active, lively and tenacious mind, Samantha," he said wryly. "Once you get an idea into your head, you pursue it. Now you are suspicious of me. Would you believe me if I told you that I, too, were nothing more than a bystander that night, as you were? Not a leader, nor a follower."

She turned to face him. "Then why did you seize me and drag me away?"

"To silence you, of course. In time, marshwomen learn to be more discreet about such things, but when they are young and in love, or concerned for a father or son or brother," he looked at her meaningfully, "they can make mistakes. I acted instinctively when I took you away from there, and probably saved your life."

At all costs, she must not incriminate Dick. Even if Mark was lying to her, if he was indeed one of the Owlerys, he might not know that Richard was one of them, unless they worked together frequently.

"Thank you, sir," she said politely, and then he threw back his head and laughed. His sensual mouth curved invitingly as he drawled, "I also acted instinctively later on . . . as you did, my wonderful, warm-blooded Samantha."

She turned away, refusing to meet his gaze, anxious that he should not see her face which, she knew, betrayed every emotion she felt for him. Even his voice conjured up those delirious hours of joy and weakened her defenses.

Then he took her by the shoulders and turned her briskly to face him. "Listen to me, Samantha," he said earnestly, "had it not been for you, I would never have known as much as I now do. You drew my attention to the cells. You detected an unfamiliar smell from beyond the locked door in the kitchen wing, do you remember that? You, of course, had no idea what sheep's fleeces smell like before they are treated. Bales of wool stored in an airless, confined space give off a strange odor. The inner door on the other side of the kitchen, you see, was locked to keep out any intruders from within the abbey, but you happened to wander through the outer access at a time when it was unguarded. I take it Jake Dempster did not expect that contingency. He did make his presence known when he saw you there, did he not?"

"Yes. He was sweeping the cloisters."

"Or so he said. Dempster was quick to fob you off, and you naturally assumed that sheep were shorn there, because of the wool in your hair and on your clothes. I didn't press you for that sample you said you had because I already had some myself. I had forced the lock of the outer door one day and compared the pieces of wool I had collected with samples from the Hawksmere flock. The difference in quality was marked. That was why I decided to leave the wall untouched, to find out if it was going to be used again." He finished casually, "By the way, what brought you there that night?"

Oh no, she thought, you don't trap me that way! She shrugged his hands from her shoulders and moved away. "I saw shadows moving across the lawn beneath my window, huddled figures carrying bundles. Naturally, I went down to see what was going on."

"So it was nothing more than curiosity?" he prompted, following her.

"Nothing more than that. You are anxious to convince me that your own involvement was the same. Now indeed, if I believe you, why should you not believe me?"

"*Touché.*" He laughed, and took her hand. "You are adorable when roused, Samantha, and I don't mean only when roused in passion. In anger you are equally challenging."

"I have good cause to be angry, since you have used my body as you would use any scullery maid's. The right of the lord of the manor, I suppose?" She pulled her hand from his and rubbed it as though his touch had burned her—which, of course, in a way it had.

He blazed instantly at her accusation. "That is not true, but since you seem determined to believe it, do so!" As quick as his anger had, so came contrition. "Oh, Samantha," he said sorrowfully, shaking his head, "I cannot blame you for misjudging me, or for your suspicions. But I beg you, bear with me a while. All will be made clear, I promise. But not yet. The time is not ripe."

"Then you admit you are playing a game with me?"

"Not with you, sweet love."

"I swear, Mark, I try to keep a sense of perspective and a sense of humor at all times," she said in frustration, "but you try me to the limits. Explain. That is all I ask."

"I cannot." He strode to the door, leaving her perplexed and confused. Then he turned and looked back at her, a hand on the ancient oaken latch. One quicksilver mood had changed to another, and his craggy face wore a new mask. In a tone of negligent curiosity, he asked, "Tell me, do you come to this room in search of solitude or—something else?"

"I am systematically cleaning the books," she answered, telling herself that it was only half a lie. "And what something else could I seek?" she went on innocently. "Rare books? I know little about such things."

"People have been known to keep diaries."

"That is so. But I would assume any diaries tucked away in

this library would be written by former Kimbolts. My ancestors. And so, of course, I would have every right to read them, would I not? If they existed, that is." With that, she picked up her skirts and began to climb the library steps, turning her back on him in dismissal.

The door closed behind him and she was instantly troubled. Had he already searched for Uncle Jonothan's diary before she and Dick had arrived from London, without success? But perhaps it was not Jonothan's diary he was alluding to.

What if the youthful Mark had himself kept some kind of a document and had left it behind when he walked out of the abbey, never to return—a diary that incriminated himself? Perhaps in smuggling activities? If he had kept records that could expose him to blackmail or conviction even at this late date, it was logical that he would wish to lay his hands on them and destroy them.

No, Samantha corrected herself at once. If that were so, he would have taken steps to recover and destroy them long ago. What a dolt you are!

The more she turned these thoughts over in her mind, the more confused she became. Putting aside the idea of anything incriminating in Mark's past, she came back full circle to Uncle Jonothan's confession. If Mark knew it existed, would he be likely to seek it now in order to expose a dead man? A man he suspected of murdering his mother? Was he capable of such malice?

Why not? Since he was unscrupulous in other ways, incapable of fidelity, and without conscience in his dealings with women?

"I hate and despise and *loathe* him!" Samantha declared to herself passionately, knowing all the time that she lied. She was emotionally bound to the man and unable to break free.

When Aunt Charlotte arrived unannounced the next morning, she hotly defended her right to be at Hawksmere, much to Samantha's amusement. At least Aunt Charlotte removed one's mind from other concerns—that was one advantage to the older woman's presence.

"I need no invitation from a young woman who is not yet mistress of this house to call upon my niece," she insisted. "My brother has visited Hawksmere, and now I choose to do the same. I hope you still make a good cup of tea, Samantha." She swept past her into the hall, taking in with one glance the furnishings and paintings.

"I try my best, Aunt," Samantha remarked, checking a smile. No longer under her aunt's domination, she found the woman amusing, and so she did not mind the disapproving glance cast in the direction of Samantha's afternoon dress.

"Pale blue! A most unserviceable color. What became of the ladylike gray dress I gave you?"

Samantha rang for tea as both women took seats in the drawing room. "Mrs. Thomas knew of a poor woman in Appledore who was able to make good use of it," she said calmly.

"You gave it away?" Aunt Charlotte looked as though Samantha had just confessed to abandoning a helpless infant in a storm.

"Mark disliked it. He commanded me to get rid of it, since he wished to see me dressed in a style that would appeal to Mademoiselle de la Roche."

"Mark did, did he? You call him *Mark*?" Aunt Charlotte put her hand to her mouth to cover a grimace. "And am I correct in my assumption that you *all* live under this roof, even that young woman who is not yet Chaters's wife?" Aunt Charlotte stood up abruptly, nearly knocking over her straight-backed chair.

"Where else could she live, pray? Would you have her cast upon society, bereft of both home and parents? But have no fear, Aunt. I make a most respectable chaperone for Mark's fiancée. By the by, he takes his ownership of Hawksmere very seriously indeed. When I arrived, the farm was in a shocking state, but in no time at all he had workmen all over the place, putting things right."

"This is comforting to hear," Aunt Charlotte sighed, taking her seat once again. "I saw the way things were going before I departed for London, before inefficient Jonothan had very nearly run the place into the ground. Sad, though, that it should be a usurper and not a Kimbolt who is setting things to rights."

Samantha was glad when Piper entered with the tea. The conversation was getting difficult to handle. Aunt Charlotte eyed the array of toasted tea cakes, crumpets, and buttered scones with an approving glance before finally looking up at Martha.

"Ha!" she said, peering at the woman closely, "So you are still employed here, Martha Piper."

"And where else would I be, ma'am? Hawksmere's been

my home since girlhood. Not that it's the same place as it were, if I may say so."

"You may indeed, my good woman, for I say so, too."

She dismissed Piper with a nod, for all the world as if she were mistress of the house.

"And where is your brother?" she demanded next of Samantha, taking a tea cake and a crumpet onto her plate.

"About his duties on the farm." Samantha placed a cup of tea beside her aunt, and added a dollop of cream as well as two lumps of sugar.

"Have you no housemaid to perform these duties?" Aunt Charlotte frowned.

"At the moment, no. Perhaps Germaine will rearrange the staff when she and Mark are married."

"A French émigrée! She has done well for herself, winning a man who owns so much."

"Could Patience not have come with you?" Samantha asked hastily, changing the subject. "I would have been glad to see her." She stirred her own tea, which she took black.

"I did not suggest it. I wanted to talk to you alone," Charlotte confided, leaning forward. "I trust that empty-headed French miss is not likely to appear?"

"I doubt it. She never takes tea."

"Good." Aunt Charlotte sipped, nodded her approval, helped herself to another tea cake and cut it precisely in half. "I hear that dressmaker's daughter lives in this household," she said.

"Alice. Yes, she does."

"A disgusting affair! You know, of course, that she was my brother's child?"

Samantha stiffened involuntarily. Poor Jonothan seemed to be getting the bad end of the stick in so many ways.

"Please tell me nothing, Aunt. I must live in this house and I must get along with the others on the staff. No gossip, I beg you."

"Gossip! It!" Aunt Charlotte put down her cup with a sharp little clatter. "You will regret this, Samantha. You should hear the truth. I know a lot, believe me!"

She swept out of the room and Samantha made no effort to detain her. Thankfully, she watched the carriage drive out of the courtyard, and then she walked briskly to the library, anxious to be alone with her thoughts.

She had not been cleaning books for five minutes when she picked another that yielded the next slice of Uncle Jonothan's

confession. She sat down on the top-most library step and began to read:

And that was when I connived with the smugglers again. Ruth knew nothing. It was better so. Even when I discovered unusual things stored in the monks' cells I asked no questions. I had never known smugglers deal in objets d'art before, but I guessed the items must have come from some aristocratic French family, desperate for money to aid their escape, who willingly sold their family heirlooms. Why such things should be hidden at Hawksmere puzzled me. However, they were moved quickly and so long as the rent I levied and my share of profits came in regularly, I asked no further questions.

Then two things happened. I will record them briefly, because it is painful to dwell on either.

There was no more. This installment linked with neither of the other two Samantha already possessed, but at least it was another piece in the jigsaw.

As she folded the paper, she was startled to attention as the library door opened and Alice walked in. The book jerked from her hand, and a second sheet fluttered to the floor, landing at the maid's feet. She bent down and began to read it unashamedly.

"Give that to me, Alice. It belongs to this book." Samantha extended her hand and clambered down the steps.

"It doesn't look as if it does," the girl murmured with a touch of insolence, but after a moment's hesitation and perusal, she surrendered it. "Shall I put the book back for you, Miss Samantha?"

"No thank you. Tell me, Alice, what brings you here?"

"I am looking for mademoiselle. I've been to the stables, and Fuller says she hasn't gone out today. I came here last of all, since I know she's no reader. I like this room," she said, wandering away and touching pieces of furniture at random. At last she stopped and placed her hand on the chair, behind the desk. "Mr. Jonothan did too, of course. I was sorry for him because he was always kind to me. He used to sit here, writing away. Poetry, everyone believed. . . ." Her glance slid to the paper in Samantha's hand and away again. "Well, I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Miss Samantha. I'll look elsewhere for mademoiselle. Perhaps she has taken it into her head to visit the farm. . . ."

She left the sentence unfinished, but Samantha understood at once. The only thing, or the only person, that could entice Germaine to any part of the farm was Richard, and Alice was obviously well aware of the fact. Samantha felt a flicker of apprehension as the door closed behind the girl. She guessed that this diligent quest for Germaine was not prompted by any sense of duty of a maid to her mistress.

When the echo of Alice's footsteps along the stone-floored hall had faded, Samantha picked up the second sheet of paper and read it. It was the continuation of a paragraph.

Turner's accidental death happened only a day or two later. I was saddened by the thought of a solitary man taking a solitary walk on the marsh and falling into the deep water below the abbey. That dike is treacherous.

No wonder Alice's attention had been caught by this. According to Aunt Charlotte and Cousin Patience, it was Jonothan Kimbolt, not Turner, who had been Alice's father. Did she know that, and was this the cause of the bold, defiant front she presented to the world?

Samantha drummed her fingers on her forehead in frustration. If only her uncle had not hidden his writings so cunningly! It could take weeks to find the rest. She could picture the man sitting at his desk, writing feverishly—crossing out, tearing up, throwing away, scribbling again until at last he had finished—and then looking around for the best hiding place. This vast arena of books all around him was a logical choice. Having purged his mind, had he then decided, with the cleverness often shown by the weak, to leave his confession in such a way that, piece by piece, it could be discovered and linked together?

"*Hiding it in the way I have planned . . .*" The words suggested systematic thought, so there had to be a system. Despairingly, Samantha thrust the latest book back into place. She had taken it at random from a shelf below those already dusted, and as she glanced up she saw a volume slightly projected, five shelves above. That was the last shelf she had cleaned, and the book was the last in which she had discovered a piece of her uncle's confession. It was a volume of sermons, as the one before had been, and so was the one she now replaced.

Swiftly, she climbed the library steps again. Here was another volume devoted to sermons—the only one on its

particular shelf. It stood by itself on the fifth shelf from the top. The second volume of sermons was five shelves below that, and now this one, another five below.

Excitement seized her as on every fifth shelf she found a single volume of sermons, and as she shook them, pages fluttered out.

When she had finished searching the shelves between the door and the fireplace she began on a wider section beyond, but this time without success. Had she solved the puzzle? Did she now possess all he had written?

She spread the pages on the desk. They were of varied sizes, some small, some lengthy, some mere scraps with odd paragraphs scrawled on them. Not one was numbered. She would have to link all together.

A knock sounded on the door and before she had time to hide the pages, Martha Piper ushered in Uncle Simeon, who announced that he had come to escort his sister home.

"Aunt Charlotte left half an hour ago," Samantha told him. "Your coachman was driving her. I hope you did not walk all this way? If so, I will have transport put at your disposal."

"No, no, naturally not," he said in a tone that implied she would have to be an imbecile to think such a thing. "I was planning to tether my horse on a leading rein behind the carriage. A gentle trot home after a long day traversing the marsh would have been merciful on the beast, one of God's creatures after all."

As usual, Samantha found his sanctimonious tone jarring, but when she recalled Uncle Jonothan's statement that Simeon had protected him and looked after him, she felt a pang of shame. Uncle Simeon's personality might not be endearing, but his heart seemed to have been in the right place where his brother was concerned.

She gathered up the papers without haste, though her instinct was to sweep them into a drawer and lock it. "And what have you there, niece?" Simeon asked with mild curiosity, recognizing the handwriting, "Samples of my unfortunate brother's poetry? Poor Jonothan—he was forever scribbling, but never with any degree of success."

He bowed in his stilted fashion and took his leave. Scarcely had he walked through the door than Samantha heard Mark's familiar stride in the hall, and the echo of his voice as he greeted Simeon. Their exchange was so brief, Mark's footsteps barely slowed down in passing.

Frantically, Samantha cast around for a hiding place. Not the desk—Mark used that. It had to be somewhere very safe indeed. Behind some of the books seemed the only answer, and she was hurrying back to the shelves when she heard Mark's deep voice. "Give me those papers, Samantha," he said from the doorway.

Deliberately, she folded them and held them firmly in both hands.

"I found some poems of my late uncle's! I mean to keep them." She walked briskly to the door. "You have come to see Germaine, of course. Alice was searching for her just now. I will see if she has been found."

"Let me have those papers, Samantha."

"The poetic ramblings of an old man would mean nothing to you, I am sure," she said hastily, trying not to look into his eyes, "and since neither my brother nor I possess any kind of souvenir of Uncle Jonothan, I am also sure you will not begrudge us this small memento."

She was out in the hall and hurrying toward the stairs when Germaine and Richard appeared. He was ushering her indoors with such attention that he was plainly unaware of anything or anyone else. Germaine's dark tresses were wind-swept, and there were scattered straws caught in them. She was laughing gaily, trying to control both her unruly hair and her billowing skirts. She, too, was unaware of anyone else.

Halfway up the stairs, Samantha glanced back. Mark was standing at the library door waiting for them, a grim expression on his face. And standing in the shadows was Alice.

Samantha hurried to her room, locked the door behind her, and then spread out Uncle Jonothan's writings. And when she had sorted them and read them, she knew her search was over. She had the beginning, the middle and the end.

She also realized why Mark wanted them. Although this account represented only her uncle's side of things and left certain questions unanswered, in possessing the document she possessed dangerous knowledge. Even if she gave it to Mark, she would still not be safe, for the mere fact that she now knew what her uncle Jonothan had known, placed her in a perilous position.

And her greastest danger might well be from Mark Chaters.

Chapter 20



She went back to the beginning of the story now, and read the pages in sequence. Uncle Jonothan's confession began with the second sheet she had discovered. Now, linked together with the rest, it all made terrible sense.

I have made so many attempts to record everything, failing each time and committing all to the fire, that I fear the task will never be accomplished. The knowledge that so long as I remain silent I am safe has been my undoing. But conscience tortures me, although now it is too late to right a wrong. I can never forget, nor can I find any escape from remorse, even in self-sought oblivion.

I wish Matt and not I had inherited the abbey. He loved the place, but he loved Clarissa more, and so it was I who became master of Hawksmere, without any inclination for the rôle, nor the ability to handle it. My share of the Kimbolt fortune dwindled rapidly through my own mismanagement. I have never deserved the protection of a brother like Simeon nor the love of a wife like Ruth.

I love her as I loved no woman before, I loved her, and I killed her, and Mark knows. I saw condemnation in his eyes before he turned on his heel and walked out of the

abbey, never to return. Thank God Simeon stood by me, protected me, and helped me.

Samantha's opinion of her clerical uncle went up a notch or two at that. She read on with interest:

Once Hawksmere was a place to be proud of, but after I inherited, it deteriorated. Simeon did his best to advise me, but even when I took his advice things became worse.

Samantha rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes, moved by pity for her dead uncle. As she read on, she was startled by the next words:

Simeon despises me, and I know it, and hate him for it. One always hates someone who recognizes one's weakness. I thought I had been clever and that no one would guess what I had done, but I should have known that Simeon would find out. He thought me a bungling fool, mismanaging the estate. He was angry when he learned how much marshland I had let go. And he heard things, of course. A parish priest always does, but not all are as diligent as Simeon. He reports rumors to Customs & Excise without hesitation; few in these parts would risk a cut throat so fearlessly. But his great church in Rye gives him authority. He has the ear of every local magistrate and Justice of the Peace. People are afraid to fall foul of him for that reason.

The only thing that puzzles me about Simeon is his pride in Hawksmere and its possessions, so out of keeping with a man who despises worldly goods. Of course, I do recall that at one time he was not a saintly man. Before he was ordained there were village girls aplenty, but so there were for all of us. After his ordination, he reformed, unlike brother Matt. Young Richard is so like his father! When the boy arrived from his harrowing adventures in France, it was like seeing Matt walk back into the abbey, a young lad again. As the boy grew older, the reminder was even more painful. I withdraw to my room more and more these days, not only because reminders of the past are painful in old age, but because I don't want young Richard to guess what Simeon has guessed.

I am glad Simeon leaves me alone now. He realizes that despite Ruth's help, there is no hope of saving Hawks-

mere. And if I could not do so when she was alive, surely I cannot do so now. I wasted her money, and never once did she reproach me. But when I had gone through it all, and my conscience ate at me, I took matters into my own inept hands. Finally, the only mainstay was smuggling, so I went back to it, secretly.

I had originally become involved when Flanders and the low countries began to need English wool. It was then that I revived one of the most ancient of all free traders, the Owers of Romney Marsh. It went well. When the smuggling season finished, I would travel and enjoy life. It was during one of these absences that I met Ruth. She had been a widow for two years and I was in my fifties. I fell in love as I had never loved before. We married, and I brought her to Hawksmere, determined to run no risks that would cause her suffering, for not only free traders are punished, if caught—their wives and families are suspect, and suffer accordingly, innocent or not. So the Owers were disbanded and paid off handsomely, to keep their mouths shut, but by the time I finally dispersed the gang, my money was almost gone.

As it happened, the Owers did not need my assistance. They continued their activities. But now I have no part in it. I cannot touch their ill-gotten gains, since they were responsible for Ruth's death. From this desk, I look at the gaping wall and hear the voice that was no figment of my imagination, calling to her from below—Mark's voice, using the name only he ever used.

At the mention of Mark's name, Samantha's interest intensified. She read on avidly:

Since marrying Ruth, I had become a happy man again. She loved Hawksmere and wanted to restore it. I let her have her way with the house, and it became a home again, with young Mark's laughter echoing hers. And I had totally rejected the other business by locking all access to the cells. Or so I thought. I should have known that locks on doors centuries old would not keep out the smuggling fraternity, as they are easily broken. Occasionally I would find contraband in the cells, and the stones I had loosened in the wall long ago would be dislodged and replaced in the dead of night.

The whole idea of using the wall had come to me long

before my marriage, at a time when I was in acute financial need. It gave ready access to the marsh below, and Hawksmere offered unrivaled accommodation for goods that could easily be brought up or lowered that way. The abbey had the additional asset of being above suspicion. The steep drop represented no difficulties to marshmen, and the deep water of the dikes provided additional protection. All in all, a perfect avenue for the Owlers.

After I married, and wished no further dealings with the smugglers, I had the wall repaired, and then had it repaired again and then again. But dry mortar can always be dislodged and replaced. I confess that deep inside, I had no inclination to make any serious attempts to stop the smugglers. It was easier to accept the rewards that were left for me each night.

When the seasons changed, and the nights grew longer, Ruth and Mark and I slept on the other side of the abbey, away from the bleak marsh winds. From there, nothing could be heard or seen. Thus, lulled into a false sense of security, my conscience rapidly eased.

When Simeon paid me a rare visit one day, several months after my marriage, he remarked that I was fortunate to have found a rich wife, adding that she seemed to be doing more for the abbey than I had ever done. But he was concerned—would her fortune extend to reestablishing the neglected farms? Again he reminded me that I had no head for business, and he offered to advise me.

Samantha frowned and put down the page. She disliked the thought of meddling Uncle Simeon intruding into the life of a happily married couple, but it did seem like him. She continued reading:

Ruth disliked Simeon, and seemed ill at ease when he came to call. But I told her how much he appreciated all she was doing for the house itself, because he had always had a tremendous pride in the place, and great family pride as well. And yet, as Ruth reminded me, he had allowed his wife to live in precious little comfort, and that when Charlotte came to dwell with him after the poor woman died, she apparently did not remain for long. "Why did she leave?" Ruth asked, but I had no idea. All

that did concern me was a gathering anxiety about money.

And that was when I connived with the smugglers again, no longer turning a blind eye, no longer content with small rewards.

Ruth knew nothing. It was better so.

Now Samantha had reached the passage about the art treasures hidden in the cells, and the reference to the two important events:

The first, and most terrible, was Ruth's death. I was sitting here, the window open, on a warm, sunny afternoon, cocooned in my illusion that nothing could go wrong. Ruth was strolling in the garden and, glancing through the window, she kissed her hand to me, saying she would leave me to my muse. I can hear the fond indulgence in her voice even now. Then she strolled on and I continued with the sonnet I was composing.

A few minutes later, I heard a distant voice calling to her. I should have paid attention to that, but was too absorbed. Then came her cry. I looked up, startled, and saw the wall give way before her. I heard the sound of her screams as she plunged to her death, and the roar of tumbling stones.

I leapt through the open window and raced to the spot. Her broken body was spreadeagled far below. I was the only person to see it, for no one else was in sight.

She had leaned against the wall that I had loosened, and about which I had never warned her because I did not wish to confess my reason for leaving it like that. In protecting myself, I destroyed her. I could not have been more responsible for her murder had I hurled her bodily down the cliff.

The writing, which had become agitated, now broke off altogether, and Samantha judged that her uncle had been unable to continue until later, since the ink had faded before the next pages were written.

Now I am taking up my quill again, for having gone so far I must continue. Mark came to me the day after Ruth's funeral and told me he had examined the wall where his mother had fallen. "There had to be a reason for those

stones being so loose," he accused me, "and there could only be one. You know the answer, I think."

So, I told him. I had to. It is impossible to lie to Mark. That was when he swore he would never return to Hawksmere. He lost his respect for me at that moment, and I knew it.

When he asked if I knew what made his mother lean against the wall at that perilous spot, I could give him no answer except that I thought I had heard a voice call to her from below and that, on recollection, I believe it to be his. When he demanded to know what grounds I had for such an outrageous suspicion, I could not recall, but of course it occurred to me later, after he had left Hawksmere for good.

Mark had always been a very individual young man; not for him the conventional mode of address between mother and son. From childhood he had called her Ruthie and that distant masculine voice, calling to her from below the wall, had used that name; a name no one else ever used. And of course, because it was her son who called, she promptly leaned over.

I must disregard Simeon's comment that Ruth's death proved advantageous to her son, who inherited all she possessed and came into the rest of his fortune immediately, held in trust for him until then.

But two things puzzle me: why no one was in sight when I looked down that pitching cliff face, and why Mark asked me if I knew what made her lean over the wall.

Again, the writing and the ink changed. The next part had been written after another lapse of time, and in a state of confusion or distress, for it became increasingly shaky, straggling completely off toward the end.

I have not yet recorded the other thing that happened—Turner's death. The perfect butler, he was, a gentlemanly, quiet, reliable man. But after my wife was killed, he seemed to change in a subtle way, as if he had something on his mind. One day he paused beside my chair and asked if he might have a word with me. He seemed unusually agitated, but I was in no mood for conversation, so waved him aside.

I remember Simeon arriving at that moment. He was

most critical, not at all sympathetic to me, his grief-stricken brother. "What about Hawksmere?" he demanded. "How will you maintain it without Ruth's money now that it has gone, all of it, to her son?"

"I won't. I can't. Nor do I care."

My brother had an impassive face, but at that moment it seemed to crack. He told me angrily that I should care, that Hawksmere was a sacred heritage. If it were his, he said, he would take a pride in it. "But you have no pride, brother. If you had, you would never have descended to the level you did, using it for smuggling of all foul practices! Do you think I haven't known, haven't guessed? I have protected you with my silence up to now, and I shall continue to protect you, but my visits will be less frequent. I have done all I can to help and guide you, but I cannot bear to watch the decline of our family home, which you have brought to ruin."

As always, he made me feel ashamed.

But immediately, he saw that he had been harsh with me. He went to the sideboard and was kind enough to pour me a drop of brandy.

"As you know," he said, "I am an abstemious man. I have no use for liquor. But you seem in need, brother. The medicinal value of an occasional drop is to be recommended." And with that, he brought the bottle to my desk and placed it beside me. A kindly gesture, I thought.

And, although he rarely came to see me again, the kindly gestures continued to arrive. Strange that I should remember that now, and write it down, but it is Simeon's brandy which now frees my mind to do so. Turner's accidental death happened only a day or two later. I was saddened by the thought of a solitary man taking a walk and falling into that great dike below the abbey.

I have done two things to try to make restitution. I have willed Hawksmere to Mark because I think he will make a good master for the place, and because I think Ruth would like him to have it. He may refuse it, but I pray he will not. And I have taken Turner's daughter into my household. He had a wife whom he had never brought into service for some reason. She called at my brother's vicarage one day, inquiring the way to Hawksmere. She brought a letter to me from Simeon, saying that I should do what I could for mother and daughter, and I was glad

to. My brother had no need to remind me of my duty since Turner died in my service, but Simeon had a deplorable tendency to preach even when not in the pulpit.

The woman was ladylike, refined. It was plain that asking for help was distasteful to her. She had been a dressmaker, and a small sum would set her up in business, she said. I gave her what I could, and was touched because the care of her child was of great importance to her. Above all, she wanted a good home for the little girl. She begged me to take the child in, so of course I did.

All I learned of her marriage was that it had been unhappy, that she and Turner had parted, but that he sometimes visited her to see the child, and paid the rent of their rooms in Sandgate, a rent she could no longer meet when he died.

Of course, I know that Martha Piper and the Thomases, and no doubt everyone for miles around, believes that she must be a former mistress of mine, and I the child's father because I took her into my house. But I care not what the gossips say. It is not true, and I am too old and too tired to care.

There is no more to set down. . . .

Samantha folded the papers sadly, and lay down her head on top of the pile with a sigh. Jonothan Kimbolt's hope that someone might find them after his death and piece all together had at last come true.

Chapter 21



From the moment Samantha read that confession, Hawksmere became a place of menace to her. She felt as if unseen eyes watched her as she hid the pages away, wishing to God she had a safer place. The locked door of a closet could be too easily forced and locked doors always arouse suspicion.

She fastened her ancient valise and was about to thrust it back on the shelf behind the row of band boxes that housed her bonnets, when her hand happened to brush against the amber taffeta dinner gown that Victoria Turner had said she could not repair. There it was before her with its slashed bodice and the lining gaping wide.

She whisked the gown off its padded hanger and probed with her fingers between the lining and outer material. Plenty of space. Within minutes she had tucked the pages inside the curving bosom of the gown, then her fingers flew as she sewed the lining into place, finally seaming together the long tear of the outer material. On inspection from the front it revealed nothing but a gentle swelling of the bodice, padding that many a slender woman indulged in, and beneath a Holland cover it would reveal nothing at all. Any rustling it made, should questing fingers riffle through her clothes, would not

be detected beneath the rustling of silks and taffetas. It was safe now to leave her closet door unlocked.

She had just put the gown in its place when she heard a loud knocking on the door.

"Samantha," Germaine called. "I wish to speak with you. Why have you locked the door?"

"Because I chose to lock it," Samantha said, opening the door unhurriedly. Then she went over and sat down at her dressing table.

"Indeed! And why?" Germaine said huffily, stepping inside and peering around. "Do you actually have secrets, Miss Kimbolt?"

"Why not? You have."

Germaine's expression sharpened and she whirled around to face Samantha. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that everyone has secrets," Samantha answered lightly. "And what has upset you now?" she asked, picking up a hairbrush and smoothing her wheat-colored locks into place.

Germaine stalked to the chair beside the dressing table and planted herself in it. "Mark. He is a tyrant and I hate him! *Je le déteste!*"

"That seems unfortunate, since you are to marry him."

"I'm not so sure that I am," Germaine muttered, shaking her head. "A jealous husband would make life unbearable. The least little thing arouses his suspicion."

"Such as?"

"Such as dear Richard's attention to me, his kindness—"

Samantha put the brush down on the dresser with a resounding thud. "It is more than that and you know it. My brother is in love with you, and you are encouraging him, *using him*—" Samantha's voice broke in sudden anger. "Isn't one man enough for you? Leave my brother alone, Germaine! Despite his worldly air, he is only a boy compared to you."

"Compared to *me*! Are you aware that I am scarcely eighteen?"

Samantha got up and walked to the window, making no attempt to contain her rage. "You are not a blessed little innocent, so stop pretending—with me, at least. Mark is jealous because he has good reason to be. I saw the pair of you come in just now. I saw the look on your faces. I saw your crumpled gown and the straws that betrayed that you'd been

lying in the hay like any village wench. And what I saw, Mark saw too."

Germaine jumped out of her chair and ran across the room to Samantha. She delivered a vicious blow flat with the palm of her hand to Samantha's cheek.

"You will leave Hawksmere for that! I will tell Mark how insolent you are and that I don't want you here. He will send you packing!"

Samantha's cheek stung, but her eyes shone with anger. "I shouldn't be too sure—especially now you have quarreled with him. Mark's anger isn't to be dismissed lightly."

"Poof! I can get around him just like that!" Germaine snapped her fingers. "I know how to get around men."

"I am sure you do. And now, I want to be left alone. That was why I locked the door. People are entitled to a little privacy now and then, even employees."

Germaine pushed Samantha aside. With a toss of her head, she turned and walked slowly to the door. Just as she was about to leave, she spun around. Her voice was barely above a whisper. "It is unwise to cross me, Samantha. Unhealthy. Believe this, and watch yourself at all times. Perhaps you are right to keep your door locked. Especially when you sleep."

When the door slammed behind her, Samantha dropped on her bed and lay there staring at the ceiling. She was not afraid, she could not be intimidated by that little French minx. And Mark would not send her packing now. Now he would keep her here and keep a sharp eye on her. He knew she had a document that might implicate him. Why else had he ordered her to hand it over? If she left, Uncle Jonothan's confession would go with her, and Mark would not take that risk. No, she would have to tread very carefully. Germaine was merely an annoyance, compared to the threat Mark now presented. She had a great deal of knowledge about him, and that knowledge was a dangerous thing.

For what she now knew was that Mark had lured his mother to her death. It was a hideous picture—the son calling out to his mother, then watching her fall to her death as he hid nearby, knowing the man who had loved her was looking on in horror.

Samantha's every instinct cried out in protest and denial, but there was no other interpretation to be put on things. Had Uncle Jonothan recorded all the details as he remembered them, even down to his brother Simeon's thoughtful glass of

"medicinal" brandy? His diabolical gift of brandy. From suspicion of Mark, her mind swung to a different suspicion of Uncle Simeon, who had plied his brother with drink. For what purpose? So that the grief-stricken man would deteriorate and die an early death? Since Jonothan's wife had been killed, perhaps Simeon assumed he would automatically inherit Hawksmere.

Of course, she had no real proof of any of this—only a great many unanswered questions. Perhaps someone else had called up to Ruth Kimbolt, using the name her son always used. That was surely a possibility. But as much as Samantha wanted to believe in Mark's innocence, she could not be certain. So many things spoke out loudly against him.

The only certainty was Mark's determination to get hold of Uncle Jonothan's confession. He had to know whether his stepfather's account of things betrayed him. But the facts were inescapable. Mark was the only person to benefit from Ruth's death, and not only because of her personal estate, but by that held in trust for him during her lifetime. Could he really have done this? Could he have been so unwilling to wait for his inheritance? If this was out of keeping with Uncle Jonothan's picture of a devoted son, it was even more discordant with Samantha's own image of the man who had become her lover.

She covered her eyes in an abortive attempt to blot out pain, and in that moment she stumbled on an incredible truth—that a woman could remain emotionally involved with a man even when she had cause to mistrust and fear him. Mark was not the man she had believed him to be, but she was the same woman, feeling the same way, unable to control her heart or her senses as far as he was concerned. And in that lay her greatest danger.

The next morning before breakfast, Germaine came rushing to Samantha's room in the west wing. She did not even bother to knock, but marched right in.

"I didn't mean it," she declared, her face a study in penitence. "Not one word of it! I wouldn't dream of asking Mark to send you away, and I could not bear to be without you. Forgive me, I beg. I know I am excitable and emotional and all the things you calm Britons are not, but I will learn, *je te jure*."

"Everyone makes wild accusations in the heat of anger," said Samantha, in what she hoped was an understanding tone

of voice. She stifled a sigh. Germaine gave a convincing performance but one that would never again sway Samantha.

Satisfied, the French girl flung her arms around Samantha and kissed her soundly on both cheeks, a demonstration that she endured unwillingly. As Germaine started to dance away, Samantha took her arm and held her. "And, of course, you will not encourage my brother anymore, because you don't want him to be hurt, do you?"

Germaine looked aghast. "I could not bear him to be hurt! I cannot bear anyone to be hurt! And I had no idea that he was so enamored of me as to take anything seriously. How could he?" Again, that characteristic shrug.

"I know my brother is foolish, Germaine. I know his faults and his weaknesses too, but his heart can be hurt the same as anyone's and I don't like the idea of that. So leave him alone. And remember—" Samantha drew a deep breath, "Remember that despite the thickness of these walls, sounds can be heard through bedroom doors."

Germaine clapped a tiny hand over her rosebud mouth. "Is *that* why you moved to another room? Surely that was unnecessary! All you had to do was pull the bedclothes over your head. Mark is such a passionate and impatient man—how can I deny him anything?"

Her laughter was taunting as she skipped away and out the door.

That evening, Mark and Germaine sat together by the drawing room fire. Samantha had long since gone to bed—she seemed to retire very early these nights, making her excuses almost as soon as they had supped. She was determined, Mark suspected, to avoid his company. Richard had lingered after his sister left, trying to hide the fact that he could not take his eyes off Germaine, and she apparently was unaware of his infatuation. But Mark's sharp eyes missed nothing. At length, realizing there was no hope of being alone with Germaine, Richard had taken himself off in despair. Poor young devil. Mark knew the agonies of calf love were always acute, but he could think of only one way to deal with Richard—the boy would have to be sent away from Hawkmere. The sooner the better.

Meanwhile, he was alone with Germaine, as he had resolved to be. She looked as diminutive as a doll, seated in a wing chair beside his own, her skin magnolia-cream in

contrast to the deep sapphire of her gown, her small breasts uplifted by the tight bodice so that they presented two soft domes above the neckline.

"You look very lovely tonight, *chérie*," Mark said, taking her hand in his as he leaned toward her. "But then, you always do."

"I am glad I please you, dear Mark." Germaine, eyes downcast, was the picture of maidenly modesty.

"That color is most becoming. Sapphire, is it not? It reflects the color of your eyes so well. And the material—what is it called?"

"Mousseleine. I am glad it pleases you, my sweet Mark." She sighed and moved her body closer to his in the big chair.

"Your trunk must have held a very extensive wardrobe indeed. I have never seen this gown, of that I am sure. How many more do you have that I am yet to see?"

She gave a trilling laugh, "I suppose I have quite a number. Why do you ask?" She rose and turned to face him fully, smiling in invitation. Then she slipped her arms about his neck and eased herself into his lap.

"Because with so plentiful a wardrobe, I cannot help wondering why a whole new trousseau is necessary."

She pouted and ran her index finger around the outline of his lips. "I trust you do not begrudge it to me, dear Mark. Every bride wishes to come to her husband newly gowned."

"You would be newly gowned to me each day. My eyes always see you as if for the first time, as fresh and lovely as you are. The ordering of an entire trousseau is an unnecessary delay. But perhaps you are not so impatient for the wedding night as I?"

With a little cry of protest, she pulled his head down to her bosom, purring protestations of love and longing in his ear. "If you do not want to wait, *chéri*, how can I deny you?" Soft little kisses smothered his face; one hand began to massage the back of his neck while the other slid down between his thighs, where her body had gently thrust itself. She forced his legs apart to give access to her hand, which now unashamedly covered his manhood. She felt it rise beneath his tight-fitting satin breeches, thrusting against the fastenings that she deftly loosened. Between breathless kisses she whispered, "You see how I want to please you? I will do anything you ask of me, anything at all. . . ." She undid the buttons of his shirt and began to play with the curling copper hairs on his chest.

He pulled them both up out of the chair, and then, lifting

her in his arms, he carried her to a couch. After laying her down upon it, he went to lock the door. When he returned to her, his face was inscrutable. She lay back against the cushions with a purring sigh.

"You want to undress me, do you not my love? It would please you to undress me. Tell me what other things would please you."

"I think perhaps you already know," he smiled, stooping over her.

"How can I, for I have never had a lover. How could I? Brought up as I was, strictly chaperoned always. But you are to be my husband and my only wish is to please you."

As he moved toward her to unfasten her bodice, she arched away from him coquettishly.

"But surely, *chéri*," she murmured in protest, "you do not wish to spoil our wedding night?"

"Spoil it? No, sample its delights. That is all I have in mind." He sat beside her on the couch and began to run his hand over her, letting one finger dip exploringly into the valley between the two cool marble mounds of her breasts.

She laughed and pushed his hand away.

"Why do you torture me, my love?" he asked anxiously, reaching for her again. "Dr. Devereaux pronounced you fit and well long ago. You are now ripe to be a bride, to become a woman."

"Devereaux?" She raised herself on one elbow, her face contorted. "That man? Bah! That spy?"

"What do you mean?" He leaned over her, pinning her to the couch.

"I say he is a spy, working for the Commune. I am convinced of it, dear Mark. Did you not see him watching those refugees disembarking at Folkestone?"

"Oh, yes, I recall that day quite well." He stared into her eyes. "Was that not the morning when you accidentally dropped your parasol down the steps of the harbor wall? When Jake Dempster nearly fouled it with his touch?"

"But you forestalled him," Germaine nodded, beaming up at him. "For which I was heartily grateful. Such a dreadful creature!" Her eyes flickered up to meet his, and then dropped. She sighed and stretched luxuriously, letting the firelight play upon her face. A woman's greatest tool was her body, she knew that well. It could be used for advantage or amusement, for beguilement or bribe. So she arched toward him now, thrusting up her breasts, and he responded exactly

as she expected him to. He lay down beside her, half covering her with his own body, which proved to be magnificent. Richard had pleased her and would do so again, but if she could enslave this man, it would be a triumph indeed.

"You were saying that Devereaux is a spy," he murmured in her ear.

"Mmm." Curling against him, she pushed up her skirts and rubbed him gently with her bare thigh. "I beg you to be careful my love. Do not allow émigrés to be smuggled across in your vessels. I swear that Devereaux, not being an aristocrat, is against all who are, and is ready to incriminate anyone who helps them. His reason for being here, despite all he says, can only be to watch suspect vessels and report on them. But why talk about this now? I thought you wanted to make love to me. . . ."

"I do, *chérie*." As if to appease her, he dropped a kiss on her brow. Then, as she relaxed in his arms, he tugged roughly at her skirts, holding her down with one hand.

"No! Don't! Please!" She began to fight him, but he was too strong for her.

"Is there something you wish to tell me, Germaine?" Mark asked abruptly, pushing her clothes back down in annoyance.

"I? No. I only want our wedding night to be perfect, my darling, and so we must wait."

"I want to know," he insisted in a steely voice, "how long ago did you lose your virginity?"

She gasped in protest and he silenced her with a word.

"If you do not tell me, I will find out for myself when we are wed, and catch you in the lie. Don't be afraid to tell me. I don't demand chastity. I only condemn the pretense of it!"

She stiffened. "But you are wrong. Why should you think—?"

He cut her off. "Don't pretend with me. You did not learn all your tricks with men in a sedate, well chaperoned household. Who taught you so much?—a 'delicately nurtured' daughter of aristocratic parents!"

She began to sob.

"They forced me! They forced!"

"Who forced you?"

"The revolutionary soldiers. They raped me in front of my parents. They made me do all those things, and more besides, while they looked on. I had no choice. It was either that or death. If I had not surrendered they would have killed my

parents there and then. Myself, also. I had to submit to them, one by one, and endure every vile thing they did."

He was silent. Then he rose and walked across the room. She sobbed even more desperately, curling her body into a pathetic huddle, but even this failed to move him. He went to the door and unlocked it.

"I would believe your story," he said, slowly buttoning his shirt, "were it not obvious that you have practiced all those soldiers taught you until you are undeniably expert. Your big mistake was in underestimating me. I am as experienced as the next man. I can tell when a woman uses her body to wield power over a man. I was deceived by you at first, but not for long. I fear young Richard Kimbolt is still taken in by you, but don't count on him remaining so."

The door closed with a sharp, contemptuous slam.

Early the next morning, Samantha was descending the back stairs to the kitchen when she met Alice coming up. The girl's eyes were red from weeping.

"What is it, Alice?" Samantha asked in a concerned tone. "Has Martha Piper been cruel to you? Tell me."

Alice brushed by her, raising her head high. "Nothing at all, Miss Samantha. Only a cinder in my eye, but it's gone now. I must be off. M'amselle's bell is ringing impatiently, as usual." There was nothing to do but let her go. As Samantha walked on, she could not help remembering the sight of Alice lingering in the shadows, spying on Dick and Germaine together. They had done nothing to hide the betraying aftermath of secret enjoyment on their faces. As Samantha thought of how it must hurt Alice, her heart went out to the girl.

But she soon forgot all about the incident. She had given Mrs. Thomas her orders and was making her way back to the main hall when Mark's voice resounded close by.

"I have been waiting for you, Samantha."

He held the library door open for her, silently commanding her to enter, and she could do nothing but obey.

With the utmost courtesy, he seated her in an armchair. Then he began pacing back and forth in front of her. She could not help but note how attractive he was in his long-tailed black coat with its large cuffs and pocket flaps. He was wearing well-cut gray knee breeches and buckled shoes, and his snowy cravat rose to his chin.

"Did you enjoy my stepfather's poetry?"

"I found it most interesting." She refused to look into his eyes.

"And informative?"

"Poetry is not meant to be informative, merely pleasurable."

"And yet when your Uncle Simeon told me that his brother occupied his last years busily writing, he made no suggestion that it was poetry."

"How could he know?" she asked carefully.

"I gather he continued to visit his brother after I left Hawksmere."

"Very rarely, I understand."

Mark stopped pacing and stood before her, his hands on his hips. "And how do you understand that? From my stepfather's 'poetry'?"

Sensing that he was trying to trap her, she weighed her answer thoughtfully.

"I am waiting, Samantha."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mark," she laughed with a casual air she did not feel, "how could I learn anything about the relationship between my uncles from your stepfather's poetry?"

"Precisely. Which means you have been reading something else that Jonothan wrote."

She moved uncomfortably in her seat and he barked, "Why so ill at ease? Are you afraid of me? By God, you were not afraid when I seduced you in the dark. You reveled in it, as you did when I made love to you later, and as you would if I made love to you now."

He moved swiftly, and the next moment she was in his arms, his mouth encompassing hers, her blood a sweet fire coursing through her veins. Resistance was impossible. Heart and soul, she loved this man, whatever he might be—rogue, philanderer, smuggler, womanizer. But not murderer! Never a murderer! Heart and mind cried out in protest at the thought, even as passion blotted out reason and her body cried out for his.

"Sweet love," he murmured, his lips against her hair, "my dear, sweet love . . . my golden rebel . . . if only there were time. . . ." Again he kissed her, folding her body close, so close that she felt as if they were already merging together.

Resolutely, he put her aside, and stepped away from her.

Her face was flushed, her mind a mad confusion of thoughts and feelings.

Gently he said, "You are not afraid of me, are you, Samantha? When you first came to Hawksmere, I remember how you marched down the hall to challenge me."

"And would do so again if the occasion warranted it. So long as I remain here, I will stand up for myself." Her eyes flashed with intensity.

"So long as you remain? That implies you are thinking of leaving."

"If my brother goes, I shall, too."

"Ah—now we come to the crux of everything. Alas, Richard is the crux of everything. And go he must. I have told him so."

Samantha looked up in surprise. So Germaine had told her the truth about that quarrel the other day.

"Then I shall certainly go with him," she said. The words sticking in her throat. She wanted to leave and yet, how could she ever leave this man?

"To the New World? Could you afford the passage? I am paying for Richard's, but have no intention of paying for yours. You will remain here because I decree it."

"Decree!" she flung at him, "what are you—Lord and Master, or God Himself?"

He laughed aloud.

"Not God, by any means, but master—yes. Therefore I can dismiss anyone I choose and retain anyone I choose, and I choose to retain you." His words might be arrogant, but his tone spoke volumes. "Richard must go for his own good. He is involved in things from which you should be thankful to have him extricated. In America he can start afresh, and he will have to fight for himself there, which is the best thing that could happen to him. You knew, of course, that he was involved with those smugglers, as I did, though how you hoped to persuade him to leave in the midst of their operations I cannot imagine. Dear, foolish Samantha—you are impetuous and often transparent, and that could place you in the gravest danger."

He came to her side and took her face in his hands, looking at her in a way that brought the hot color back to her face.

She jerked her head away. "You cannot keep me here against my will and I doubt whether Germaine would wish me to stay. As your wife it will be her duty, not mine, to

supervise the household, which means that I shall very soon be superfluous here."

"But not to me. Never to me." His voice was low and warm in her ear.

"Good God, do you expect me to remain as your mistress, beneath the same roof as your wife? What kind of a man are you?"

"You know that better than anyone," he answered cryptically.

"I pray I do not, for the man I now fear you to be is not the kind of man I wish to know!" But she meant not a whit of what she was saying. Even now, her heart and body cried out for him.

"If you come to the summer house after dusk this evening," he whispered, running his hand over the crown of shimmering hair, "I will prove that I am no different from the man you fell in love with. And you do love me, Samantha. What is more, you still want me as I want you." He was so close, she could feel his hot breath on her face.

"How can you say that?" she cried, pulling away from him with all her strength. "You who are soon to wed the woman you brought here from France?"

"Not soon," he said.

She glared at him with uncomprehending eyes, then shook her head in disbelief.

"Germaine is by no means ready for marriage," he explained, "and I am by no means ready to marry her now."

"But you love her!" Samantha babbled. "No man could have gone to so much trouble for a woman, or given her so much, if she didn't mean more to him than anyone in the world."

He clasped his hands together and looked down at them, as if he wished to hide his thoughts within the confines of his fingers. Then he said, "That is true. I fell in love with her at first sight. It was at a ball in the Tuileries, only a few weeks before that crazed mob marched on Versailles. The ball was patronized by a man called Robespierre, whom I disliked on sight.

"At any rate," he shrugged, "I was presented to him at the same time as the Marquis de la Roche and his wife and daughter, who were in Paris for the season. Germaine was strictly chaperoned, but I gained an introduction. I postponed my return solely to visit the Loire Valley, so taken was I with her that evening. Boldly I presented myself at the chateau,

recalling my meeting at the Paris ball to her parents. They were courteous and received me. But my hopes received a severe blow. Their daughter was already betrothed to the elder son of a very aristocratic family, and what was I but an English boatbuilder without rank or title? But before I left I managed to talk to Germaine alone. I had heard rumors of the coming revolution and I felt it my duty to warn her about it. I gave her the address of a seafaring man in St. Nazarre, who could get a message to me in England. Eventually, it came. Her fiancé had fled to Poland when his parents were arrested by the National Guard. I traveled back to France immediately and found Germaine and her parents. The rest you know."

"I see."

Samantha tried to read the expression on his face, but he turned away. "Then, tell me one thing," she continued in a quiet tone. "Do you still love her?"

As soon as she had said the words, she wished for the power to retract them, but it was too late. He was silent for a long moment. At last he said, "Germaine and I are bound, but not by love—by something else just as strong. . . . There is a debt that must be paid." His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the still room.

What did he mean, Samantha wondered? The joy of knowing that he no longer loved the French girl was completely obliterated by the agony of realization that they were still bound to each other.

"But I did not ask you here to discuss that," Mark said brusquely, rubbing his brow as if to erase the memory of their conversation. "Let us discuss those papers belonging to your uncle. Admit it, Samantha. You lied about them. My stepfather never completed a poem in all the days my mother and I lived here."

"He may have done so after you left." She was on her guard again, as was he, but all the time their awareness of each other was a sustained undercurrent beneath their talk.

"Clever Samantha!" he said with a snap of his fingers. "You are quick-witted, but a very poor liar. And I would not have you otherwise. I dislike women who try to hide the truth."

"Yet you are trying to hide the truth now. Why do you really want to read those papers? Do you think perhaps they contain incriminating evidence against you?"

"What do you mean?" he stormed.

"You tell me!" They were sparring again, neither willing to give an inch.

"And suppose I tell you that you are jumping to the wrong conclusions?" he retorted. "I may wish to lay my hands on other kinds of evidence."

She wished she could understand him, understand the man as well as his enigmatic words, but just as she was about to confront him, carriage wheels sounded outside. A minute later, as she and Mark stood fencing each other off, Piper tapped on the door and announced Miss Kimbolt had arrived.

Samantha raced to the door, delighted to have an excuse to end this conversation. She was also glad of the opportunity to see Patience, as they had not met since their encounter by Folkestone harbor. She embraced her cousin warmly. "Patience! I am so glad you've come." She glanced at Mark but read nothing in his face.

"I am here to take you for a drive, Samantha," Patience said, fussing with her gloves. "I beg you to come at once—no protests now! It is a beautiful day, and I am in need of company."

"An excellent idea!" Mark exclaimed, coming over and taking both women by the hand. "Your cousin will benefit from some fresh air; I declare she has been cooped up in this library too much of late. And it will be my pleasure to accompany you. It is a long time since I took a drive through the countryside with two young ladies."

Patience seemed disconcerted. "That is kind of you, Mark. But I had hoped for a chance to chat with Samantha alone, as women do." She laughed girlishly.

"Then I shall be silent and allow you all the privacy you desire. Besides, I have always longed to be a fly on the wall during one of those 'women's chats.' I am sure it will be most edifying." He began to pull her toward the door.

Samantha saw through his gallantry at once. He was determined not to let her out of his sight. At least, she decided, in Patience's company, he could question her no more, so off she went to don bonnet and pelisse.

When she descended to the courtyard, Patience was already seated at the reins of a perch-carriage. The vehicle, built for self-driving, had no coach box. Samantha was struck by its elegance but made no comment. Could this be a gift from a generous patient of Dr. Devereaux? Undoubtedly, Patience would explain in her own good time.

The carriage seated three passengers comfortably. Mark

handed her up and reached over to Patience. "You let me take the reins," he offered. "That way the two of you can talk without distraction."

"No, no, Mark," Patience protested. "I have the opportunity to drive so rarely, and I really enjoy it. Please."

He promptly seated himself between the two women, and as they drove off, Samantha was very much aware of his body close beside her. It made her feel weak and giddy, much as she tried to control herself.

Bowling along the road to Appledore, her curiosity got the better of her. "This carriage, Patience, is simply beautiful. Surely it cannot be a recent acquisition of my uncle?"

"Goodness no, an ungodly thing like this? This belongs to a friend who put it at father's disposal whilst his own carriage is being repainted." She let out a bright, artificial laugh. "Can you imagine my dear father indulging in anything so extravagant as this? He thinks even the loan of it will earn him a year or two in purgatory. Hence, he lets *me* drive it."

Mark sat with his arms folded before him, missing nothing. Samantha glanced sideways at his closed face, wondering what thoughts lay behind it and how he could be impervious to the fact that Patience wanted to be alone with her. The few remarks he addressed to her cousin were answered only in monosyllables, until he ceased his attempt to be sociable and gazed pointedly at the passing countryside.

Samantha was concerned about Patience. The girl's pallor was unusual, and she could not hide the unmistakable tension in her voice and body. It was clear she had come to Hawksmere because she needed someone to confide in, but she could say nothing in Mark's presence.

As a lull came in the conversation, Samantha began to notice that Patience was driving at an unusually fast clip, as if bound for a specific destination. She was puzzled. "Patience, perhaps we should turn back," she suggested at last, "or Uncle Simeon will be annoyed. I know he dislikes dining late."

"Aunt Charlotte can look after him," Patience answered indifferently, her eyes riveted to the road ahead of her.

"Well, in that case, why don't you come back to Hawksmere with us and dine? We should return at once. Mrs. Thomas is displeased when her meals are spoiled."

"I will pacify Mrs. Thomas," Mark cut in. "Do not fret, Samantha, and enjoy this drive. For my part, I am finding it vastly interesting."

Samantha shot Mark a meaningful look. Interesting? A drive through fields and wooded lanes and sleepy villages? Pleasant, yes, but why "vastly interesting"? She was jolted nearly out of her seat as the carriage hit a large rock. Patience grunted with the effort of controlling the horses. Her hands were tight on the reins, which did nothing to improve her control of them. When Hythe came in sight, Samantha leaned across to her cousin. "Why not let Mark take over now?" she asked. In response, Patience suddenly plunged down Blackhouse Hill and whipped unexpectedly through the wide open gates of Monks Hall, reining so sharply at the entrance that the horses reared.

When Samantha could get her breath, she exclaimed, "You did not tell me we were calling on someone!"

Patience dropped the reins and descended hurriedly, tossing her words over her shoulder. "You must excuse my forgetfulness," she said, running toward the door, "and I am sure Mr. Chaters will forgive me if I ask him to wait outside. Only you and I are expected."

"You know the owners, then? The people from London who visit here only occasionally?" Samantha sat back in her seat and looked at Mark curiously.

"If I did not, would I have come?" Patience asked in a high-handed manner, very unlike herself. And calling upon strangers without even announcing it in advance? It was unusual, but she trusted Patience to make it all clear when the time was right.

Mark dismounted and held out his hand to her. As she descended, she saw her cousin sweeping ahead to a flight of stone steps leading up to a carved front door. Even her back seemed to betray agitation. As Mark walked with Samantha to the entrance, he said quietly, "I will remain close by. Remember that."

This was strange, Samantha reflected as she followed her cousin. Patience had already turned the heavy iron handle that opened the main door, not even pausing to wield the bell-pull, but walking straight in. She left the door ajar for Samantha, who picked her way along slowly. Patience was marching ahead down the length of a splendid hall. When she opened a door at the far end, Samantha heard her voice echoing behind her.

"Well, here she is. I have brought her."

Chapter 22



Samantha pushed past her cousin and walked through the door of an elaborately furnished room. It made the perfect setting for an elaborately dressed woman who was reclining with indolent ease on a chaise longue.

Victoria Turner smiled past Samantha. "Well done, Patience," she said in a condescending tone. "You may leave us."

Samantha found herself gaping at the dressmaker. Her cascading curls were crowned by upstanding ostrich feathers and a wealth of scarlet bows, and her black and scarlet striped satin gown culminated in an enormous fichu supported by stays to form a *trompeuse* rising to the chin. Her face was heavily enameled, with beauty patches on cheekbone and chin. Compared with her normal appearance, she looked outlandish and vulgar, and yet somehow Samantha knew that her previous appearance had been a disguise all the time. At last she was seeing the woman's true self.

"You are surprised, Miss Kimbolt?" Mrs. Turner inquired in a cool voice. "Not by my attire, I hope, which is absolutely *à la mode* since Madame Rose Bertin escaped to England. She was Marie Antoinette's 'Minister of Fashion,' as I suppose you are aware. I am proud to say that she taught me

all I know, for as a girl I was apprenticed to her in Paris. That was why Mademoiselle de la Roche recognized me, you see, even after all these years. The dear young lady's *maman* used to order her clothes from Madame Bertin. But you have not been brought here to talk about fashion. We must go on to more serious things. Such as the document your late uncle left behind, so well concealed that it was not found even by that inquisitive family lawyer. It took a conscientious young woman like yourself to stumble upon it. Pray, do sit down. We have much to discuss."

"We have nothing to discuss." Samantha looked around at the furnishings of the enormous room—Louis XV chairs and commodes, Sevres and Meissen porcelain, paintings from the French, Dutch and Italian schools—all priceless, and all reminding her of Uncle Jonothan's discoveries in the Hawksmere cells. The items had been stored temporarily and then removed.

"There are no mythical owners of Monks Hall from London, are there, Mrs. Turner? You own this place." She faced the woman and asked bluntly, "Why were all these treasures hidden with contraband?"

"Ah. So you know! Which proves that Jonothan Kimbolt's . . . memoirs, shall we call them . . . contained information best left unrevealed. If you must know," she went on, arranging a curl around her ringed finger, "the reason for storing them was simply that there was no house ready to receive them. These pieces had been bought when the market was ripe and the prices were right, so they had to be kept somewhere. The most convenient hiding place was unfortunately somewhat damp, but they were removed as soon as possible."

"You refer to the cells at Hawksmere?" Samantha said, taking a step closer to the woman. "The perfect refuge for stolen goods."

"They were not stolen, I assure you!" Victoria Turner cut in hastily. "They were legitimately bought, but that fact alone would have attracted comment."

Samantha sat down slowly in a chair opposite the chaise. Suddenly she knew everything. "You mean . . . *he* had nowhere else to store them, and their purchase would have focused attention on him and stirred up questions."

Her supposition elicited a broad smile from the other woman. "So you've guessed. Or was it recorded in that journal—which, of course, you are going to surrender."

"There is no journal."

"That's a lie." She swung her legs to the floor and sat bolt upright. "Simeon saw the pages in front of you and one glance was enough to tell him that they were notes in his late brother's handwriting. What have you done with them?"

"I am not answerable to you."

Samantha rose and moved quickly to the door, but just as she reached it, it swung open. Patience was standing there, greatly agitated.

"Let them go!" she cried, rushing to Mrs. Turner. "You promised that if I brought her to you, they would be freed. The man is desperately ill!"

"The doctor is with him. Let him do what he can." Victoria Turner's shrewd eyes flashed with knowledge that now she had the upper hand. She did not intend to relinquish it.

"He is doing what he can, but the man needs special care, and the woman is very weak. And now the door is locked on them. Give me the key!" she cried, stretching out her hand. "You promised!"

"That promise will be kept as soon as your cousin cooperates. Go back to your suffering sick, and leave us alone," snapped Mrs. Turner.

"I hate you, Victoria Turner! You are everything Aunt Charlotte said you were!"

Patience clutched her hands together and, with a brief miserable glance at Samantha, she ran out of the room. The door slammed behind her.

"What did she mean?" Samantha demanded. "Who are the people she talks about? Why am I being used as barter?"

"The creature is hysterical—give her no thought." Mrs. Turner got up slowly and went to Samantha. She took her hand firmly and led her back to her chair. "We have other things to talk about." The woman returned to the chaise longue, reseated herself, and spread her skirts with pride. "I knew as soon as we met that you were an intelligent young woman. Understand this—you will be able to prove nothing once you have handed over the evidence you now retain, or when it is removed from wherever you have put it. And it will be removed, believe me, even if you refuse to cooperate, for there are few hiding places in that room of yours. I inspected it well the day I came to fit your gowns."

Samantha laughed in her face. "Your diligent observation availed you naught. I vacated that room."

Mrs. Turner did not seem disturbed by this news. "That is

of no consequence. My daughter is aware of all your movements. At this precise moment she is searching for those pages and may well have found them already."

"Alice! Is she a part of your nefarious schemes? Is that why you sought refuge for her there?"

Victoria Turner shrugged impatiently. "The tiresome girl owes me loyalty."

Somehow this seemed out of keeping with Alice's nature, as Samantha saw it. Defiance, pride, insolence, these formed the girl's protection against life. But taking vengeance against someone who had not directly hurt her—no, that wasn't like her.

"Since you are so confident of getting what you want," Samantha fenced, rising and walking around to the back of her chair, "why detain me?"

"Because it is necessary, not only to keep you away from the abbey while it is searched for the document, but to find out just how much you learned from it." Victoria drummed her fingers on the arm of the chaise.

Samantha's brain raced. She could do one of two things: admit the actual contents of Uncle Jonothan's confession, or pretend that he had committed to paper much more than that—he had incriminated his brother in the mismanagement of Hawksmere. Poor Jonothan might have been naïve, but his niece was not. She had never liked Uncle Simeon, but now she despised him.

"What are you to my uncle?" she demanded sharply. "His mistress? And Alice, is she *his* child?" She suddenly slapped her hand to her forehead. "How stupid of me not to realize to which brother Aunt Charlotte was referring. . . ."

"Your aunt is a boring, inquisitive creature! But Simeon will get rid of her again, as he did before. She ferrets about too much. She had not been back here for twenty-four hours before she marched into my salon and had the impertinence to tell me to leave the district, just as she had done years ago. As if the threats of a spiteful and neurotic old woman to expose my relationship with her brother could even be believed! Now," she said, her eyes narrowing as she rose again and approached Samantha, "let us waste no more time. How much do you know?"

"Of what?" Her expression was innocent, confused.

The woman's tolerance snapped. "Do not fence with me, or it will be the worse for both of us!"

"Us? Will you be punished by Simeon if you fail with me?" Suddenly Samantha noticed the fear in the other woman's face.

"Do not ask such questions—the less you know, the better. By the time your visit here is over, you may know too much, and people who know too much are silenced very effectively in these parts. Understand me, Samantha," she added, taking a breath, "I like you. You are not so stupid as Patience. I have no wish for you to come to any harm, and that can be easily avoided if you reveal all you know. Your late uncle *did* leave a record. All that writing, all that scribbling he busied himself with, all those pages burned on the fire. Alice used to tell me about the pile of blackened paper choking the grate in the mornings. But sometimes odd scraps escaped the flames. Fragments with names on them: Simeon, Mark, Ruth, Matt, and . . . Clarissa.

"You see," she exclaimed, when Samantha did not respond, "Alice has always been sharp and observant. She had been taught to be. She was also resentful because she was delegated to menial duties and thought herself superior to them—as indeed she was. But I made her turn her position at Hawksmere to advantage. Take notice of everything, I told her. Never miss a thing. Use every enticement you possess on whomever may be useful. Every scrap of information or knowledge can be valuable eventually. This was something you learned yourself, excellent sleuth that you are, Samantha. But I regret the fact that you may have too much knowledge. You are unlikely to leave this house alive—our steward will take care of that."

Samantha gripped the back of her chair until her knuckles turned white, wondering how brave she could be and how well she could bluff. "Dempster," she said slowly, trying not to think about how the man would relish the opportunity to hurt her.

Victoria nodded. "An objectionable man, is he not? But indispensable, I fear."

"So, when he was dismissed from Hawksmere, he had to be accommodated elsewhere, and well paid in the bargain, to seal his lips."

Alice's mother nodded impatiently. "And then *you* began probing because of that handsome brother of yours, the one Alice is so enamored of. You were worried about him, were you not? You wondered what he was up to. A nice young

man, but I would be glad to see him out of my daughter's life. She cares too much for him, and it is never wise to care too much for any man."

"Is that something you have always known," Samantha asked curiously, "or did you discover it after you married your unfortunate husband?"

"Turner?" She shrugged. "He had his uses. He also had the best years of my youth. A woman has to better herself."

Samantha pictured a lonely man walking on the marsh, a reserved man, confiding in no one. Was Alice his child after all? And had his wife's association with Uncle Simeon started long before his death? Was that the reason for the rift in their marriage? There had to be a good reason for Victoria Turner running a modiste's business in a small seaside town. There had to be reasons for so many things. Samantha was bewildered. She decided to turn the tables and find out whatever she could while she could.

"By 'bettering herself,'" she asked, walking along the border of the plush rug until she came to stand by the window, "do you mean that a woman should persuade some guillible man to finance her in business? Even a dilapidated shop, with a mean room above, must have depleted poor Uncle Jonothan's small resources, but he did it out of respect for your husband, who died in his service. And Uncle Simeon did *not* have to remind Uncle Jonothan of his duty in that respect." She could see the carriage from where she stood, but where was Mark? Where was he!

"I see you learned a lot from those notes you have hidden away." The woman spoke as she moved restlessly toward Samantha, her skirts rustling. "And now are you going to be sensible, or must I bring pressure to bear?"

In a wild bid for further time, Samantha flung another question at her.

"What did your husband know? Why was he drowned? To keep his mouth shut forever?"

"Why should you imagine he knew anything?"

"It was too much of a coincidence—his going like that so soon after Uncle Jonothan's wife was killed. And of course, he had said to my uncle—" Samantha bit her tongue.

The woman grabbed her arm and shook her, "What did he say to your uncle?" she insisted sharply.

Samantha's mouth closed stubbornly. Glancing at the door, she wondered if she could successfully make a dive for it. *I will remain close by, Samantha. Remember that. Dear God,*

where was Mark? But would he help? He wanted the document just as much as this woman did, not to mention Uncle Simeon, too cowardly to face her himself.

"Are you afraid of Uncle Simeon, Mrs. Turner?" she demanded, stalling for time. "I think you must be, to handle this meeting for him. Only a cowardly man hides behind a woman's skirts—you know that, so why fear the creature? Or do you obey him because it pays you to? Looking at all this—" She gestured around the room at the porcelain and chairs and chandeliers, "—I really don't understand your need to make dresses."

"My trade is as good a disguise as any, Miss Kimbolt."

"For what?"

"That is my concern," she smiled coyly. "Let us merely say for concealing a relationship from curious neighbors and disapproving parishioners. If a worthy clergyman makes a point of proclaiming his dislike of a certain hard-working dressmaker, certainly their liaison will attract no attention. But I have had enough of this dalliance," she said, her voice becoming hard. "If I can't wring the truth out of you, someone else will." She rose and stalked across the room, her skirts billowing around her.

As she flung open a connecting door leading to another room she cried, "You deal with her! I cannot!" And Dempster's figure promptly loomed in the doorway. The expression on his face—expectant, relishing—filled Samantha with such revulsion that she was forced to look away from him, to the room beyond. Could she dash past him and count on his losing his balance as he reached for her? She wasn't sure. . . .

As her eye counted the steps to freedom or punishment, she caught a glimpse of a painting hanging beyond Dempster's shoulder in the next room. It was a portrait of a woman—a woman in a green gown, with golden hair tumbling over her shoulders, and features incredibly like Samantha's own.

Everything else faded before her eyes as she stared at her mother's face, with that well-remembered smile on her lips and laughter in her eyes. Here it was! The portrait that Clarissa Kimbolt had sold to a dealer without her husband's knowledge, to keep a roof over their heads.

"How did that picture get here?" she cried, tears filling her eyes and spilling over. Without waiting for an answer she pushed past Dempster and into the room beyond. She stared up at her mother, choking with emotion.

Behind her, Victoria Turner said with bitter mockery, "The Fair Clarissa! Ask your Uncle Simeon. After all, he bought it. You commissioned a Parisian dealer to purchase it for you secretly, did you not, Simeon?"

Samantha whirled around to see her uncle sitting nearby, lounging casually in a large wing chair. She scarcely recognized him. Without his clerical garb and with his white hair flowing loose instead of tied up in its customary neat black bow, he had assumed a totally different personality. A long quilted robe of gold satin, with wide blue revers and matching cuffs, completed the transformation from an ascetic to a man with a pronounced taste for luxury. In Samantha's state of shock, the man's pallor seemed deathly.

"Get the girl out!" he rasped in anger. "I told you she was not to enter this room!"

She was jolted back to reality as Dempster pinioned her arms behind her. Despite her helpless struggling, she was unable to break free. But her mind raced. She flung her disheveled hair from her face, spitting the words at her uncle, "You bought my mother's portrait? *You*, who disapproved of her and condemned my father for marrying her!" Pages of Uncle Jonothan's writing spun through her memory, words leaping out,

"*Matt was not the only man who loved her. . . .*" Samantha looked at Simeon Kimbolt and let a slow, knowledgeable smile spread across her face. It pleased her to see color flush darkly into his own.

"Poor Uncle!" she mocked, shaking her head. "Have you had to content yourself with only a picture of her all these years? My father was heartbroken when she sold it, but I feel he would not mind now. After all, *he* had the original; he had *her*. And she brought him more happiness than you have ever known, or ever given to others. Did your wife know of your secret devotion? Poor soul, what a wretched life she must have had, living with such a hypocrite as you!"

A couple of swift strides brought him to her side and her neck snapped back as he struck her, first across one cheek, then back across the other. His eyes were chips of ice, lit by the fire of his rage. Then, with no change of expression, he placed both hands around her neck. She could feel the pressure of his thumbs beneath each ear and heard his voice, smooth as silk, "Do you know what I could do to you now, my dear niece?" he murmured in a cool, emotionless voice. "Press hard on the carotid arteries and in less than a minute

you would be dead. But alas, it would be quick and practically painless, and Dempster knows better ways; ways to make you talk before you die. So I will leave him to deal with you, and let my own hands remain unsullied." With a sudden movement he jerked her around, out of Dempster's grip. "You resemble her indeed," Simeon went on gazing at the portrait above them. "She was desirable and challenging, and I hated her and loved her—but once she mocked me as you did just now, scornful because she knew that I wanted her lovely body and had enjoyed others, too. She did not know of my other occupation, she saw me only as an ordained priest who concealed his predilection for women, and for that she despised me. It was a misjudgment I had to tolerate because my clerical role was an essential disguise for more profitable activities. I would have provided for her far better than my brother did. I would have denied her nothing. But instead, she chose Matt."

With a grunt of raged frustration, Simeon pushed her across to Dempster. "Deal with her," he commanded. "And when she has revealed what my brother's notes contain, dispose of her."

Before Dempster could take a step toward her, she challenged, "What makes you think Uncle Jonothan's confession revealed anything?" There had to be some way out of this—some way to let Mark know what was going on here.

"Confession?" Simeon echoed sharply.

"To the part he played in his wife's death. It was on his conscience. That was why he wrote it all down. But he was never sufficiently interested to find out the identities of the smugglers. Certainly he never suspected *you* in any way, Uncle Simeon. You had him too drugged with drink to care."

"She is lying!" Victoria Turner cried. "Alice used to save scraps of paper with names on them—Simeon, and Matt, and Mark. . . ."

Samantha looked at the woman, and hoped her glance was as cool as she tried to make it.

"Of course it was natural for him to mention family names." Her intent glance returned to her uncle. "For a long time you hoped to get your hands on Hawksmere, did you not? Wasn't that your reason for giving Jonothan bad advice and encouraging him to make mistakes—all in the hope that he would be forced to hand it over to you? But when he married a rich woman, you saw your chance of letting Hawksmere slip clean away. Was it then that you looked

around for another house where you could enjoy the fruits of your illicit trading and pursue your secret life? Monks Hall was a good choice, so far from your parish."

"You talk too much," he snapped, but for the first time Samantha sensed an uncertainty about him. He was wondering if she had spoken the truth about the confession. Apparently Victoria sensed his hesitation, for she said impatiently, "This is nothing but a ploy on her part, a bid to escape."

"She cannot." He nodded to Dempster who moved quickly to Samantha's side. She whirled away from him, but he came after her and took her hands in a cruel, vicelike grip.

"There are other people in this house, too," she insisted frantically. "Patience is here—you forced her to bring me away from Hawksmere, did you not? If I scream, she will hear me."

"She is too busy with her poor charges upstairs, and I imagine they are well accustomed to screams," her uncle said callously. "They could not come running to your rescue even if they wanted to. I gather the doctor is quite concerned about the state of their health."

Refugees, Samantha realized at once. Her uncle was using them as pawns in a ruthless game of human chess. How else could he have forced his daughter to bring her cousin here under false pretenses? He must have promised to release the émigrés only if she complied. Samantha's mind switched from one thought to another. Where was Mark? Even if she managed to wrench free of Dempster, she would never escape from the room before one of them caught her. Jake Dempster had a bitter score of his own to settle, and was eager to be about it.

A pretense of compliance seemed her only hope, so she let her arms relax, her resistance slacken, and her body slump as if she had given up.

At that precise moment the door opened and Mark's voice said calmly, "Are you ready, Samantha? I cannot wait indefinitely. Did you not tell your uncle I had come with you?"

In a flash, Samantha was out of Dempster's grasp, across the room, and swept through the door by Mark. They were halfway across the outer room when he threw over his shoulder, "I congratulate you on all this magnificence, Reverend—but not on the hospitality shown to guests!"

With a crash Dempster leapt after them, knocking over furniture in his wake. He grabbed Samantha with a snarl, but

Mark hit out with a swift upper cut to the man's chin, sending him sprawling. His head struck the floor with a sickening crack, but neither Samantha nor Mark paused to look back. They were in the hall, racing to the front door.

At the foot of the steps stood the perch-carriage, and another vehicle was already pulling away down the drive. It was the one Samantha had seen by Folkestone harbor awaiting André Devereaux and his refugees. Mark lifted her bodily into the perch, leaped in after her and snatched up the reins.

"We're safe now," he told her, touching her trembling hand. "The most they can do is send Dempster after us—if I haven't cracked his skull. Even if he is able to hold a gun, I am as good a marksman as he, and not so reckless. The last thing they will want to do is cause a public inquiry over a shooting, accidental or otherwise. It would bring too much to light."

They were already bowling through the gates and on to Blackhouse Hill, overtaking the doctor's carriage on the descent. Devereaux was driving carefully and as they passed, Samantha caught sight of Patience inside, and the head and shoulders of another passenger whose features she could not see. She also glimpsed a third person, half-lying on the opposite seat.

And then they were racing through the main street of Hythe, the rumble of wheels and the clatter of hooves echoing on the cobblestones. Not until they were clear of the town did Mark speak.

"Did Dempster hurt you?"

"No. I'm fine." She held on as the carriage jolted over the rough stones. "But how did you know where to find me?"

"Frankly, I was just plain impatient," he laughed. "After waiting an unconscionable time, I grew uneasy. The hall was empty, but I had no idea where to look for you. I searched the nearest rooms, then heard someone running downstairs. It was your cousin, very distraught. She begged for my help, saying your uncle Simeon had locked these poor wretches in with Devereaux upstairs. I put my shoulder to the locked door and helped the doctor get his patients down the back stairs and across to the stables. Afterward I went back for you. Patience told me where you were."

"And why I was taken there?"

"I had guessed that already."

"Because you want the same thing?" she asked boldly, praying that she had guessed wrongly about Mark's motives.

"Yes, and for the same reason. But *they* fear that Jonathan Kimbolt recorded too much, and I hope he did. I want to find out the identities of the smugglers who used Hawksmere and, more important, the name of their leader. Why else should Jonathan have hidden his precious document? And you, infuriating witch, seem to have decided to keep it to yourself!"

She did not know whether to laugh or cry. Poor Uncle Jonathan, purging his unhappy mind of guilt, bent on incriminating no one, anxious only to bare his soul for his own satisfaction. Still, she was not sure. "I think you want it for a different reason," she challenged.

In the dusk she saw him turn and look at her, puzzled. Then he turned away again.

"We will talk when we reach home, Samantha."

Home.

Once again and with a rush of relief, she realized that the place of which she had always dreamed, and with which she had identified herself, had indeed become home to her. This man, for whom she had such mixed and troubled feelings, was taking her home. She turned away, tears blurring her vision.

She was tired, she was shocked, and above all, she craved to know everything that Mark could tell her, no matter what the consequences.

When they reached the abbey, her brother came hurrying down the drive to meet them, but before he could speak, Mark indicated that he was to accompany him to the other carriage. Together, they helped Devereaux lift someone out and carry him indoors, as Patience followed with a woman who leaned heavily upon her arm. Samantha glimpsed a fringe of white hair beneath her worn shawl.

They took the man through the hall and into the drawing room, where they laid him gently on the sofa. Samantha rang for Piper, and when she came, Samantha requested rugs and a hot brick for the man's feet. The pallor of his face looked almost like that of death, the closed eyelids paper thin, blue-veined.

"Who are they?" Dick whispered to her as Piper went hurriedly for provisions. "Why have they been brought here?"

Mark overheard the question and answered softly, "To be nursed—and for another reason." Patience nodded solemnly.

The doctor was bending over the man now, testing his pulse. "If your husband does survive," he said grimly to the

woman in French, "I doubt if his mind will ever be the same again. He may remember nothing at all."

The woman burst out crying and responded in her native tongue, "Then I pray for such a mercy, for his own sake." Her voice was heavy with grief. Mark went to the sideboard, poured a cognac and placed it in her shaking hands. She sipped it mechanically, scarcely aware of what she was doing until the fiery spirit made her cough. Samantha was unable to take her eyes off this brave woman. It was evident that she had once been beautiful; now, Samantha could tell, she had aged beyond her years.

Piper returned with the hot brick and rugs. "Prepare two rooms for these good people, Martha," Samantha ordered, "and heat some water."

"No. Please," came the small voice of the woman. "Only one room. I wish to remain with my husband. I will sit with him until the end. It is near." There was tragic resignation in her voice. "But at least he will not die in captivity. Thank you, *M'sieur le Docteur*," she sighed, turning to Devereaux, "you and others of your kind."

Martha started for the door but before she could go Mark asked brusquely, "Please, when you are upstairs, summon Mademoiselle de la Roche. I wish her to be here."

But there was no need, for in the next instant, Germaine's step sounded in the hall and she called out asking who had just arrived.

"There are two carriages outside," she said as she burst through the door. There was curiosity and mild annoyance in her voice as she asked, "Who are these people? Who brought them?"

The words were cut off abruptly as the old woman rose and looked at her. Germaine stared back, her face a white mask. Mark watched her closely, and Samantha tried to fathom what lay behind his veiled eyes. Then she looked over at Germaine, who whispered only one word,

"*Maman!*"

Chapter 23



"Yes, Germaine," her mother whispered, "your father is here too, though I doubt if you will recognize him now. I pray God he may not recover consciousness and recognize you. The memory of your betrayal has tortured him ever since you promised to conduct us to safety, then you handed us over to the National Guard instead."

The woman swayed and Patience reached out to support her. Samantha could not take her eyes off Germaine. Quick flashes of disbelief, dismay, fear, and finally desperation appeared on the French girl's face. Her lips moved wordlessly, and then she recovered, trying to laugh.

"It is a mistake!" She looked from one face to the other, asking for assurance. "A ghastly mistake, I tell you!"

"It is no mistake," André Devereaux replied. "They have papers proving that they are the Marquis de la Roche and his wife, of the Chateau Corde-sur-Loire. Your parents, *mademoiselle*."

"My parents never looked like this!"

"They do now, thanks to you." The coldness in Mark's voice struck a chill into the room. Germaine was silent, then she whirled around and raced to the door, only to find him there before her.

With suppressed rage he bit out the words between clenched teeth. "This time you don't run away, nor can you buy your escape as you did by selling your parents and your services to the new regime, in exchange for your own contemptible life and a safe conduct to England. No wonder Devereaux found few traces of suffering after your 'tortuous' journey! At what point did you transfer to a fishing vessel for the last fatiguing lap across the Channel? Boulogne? Calais?"

"Chaters . . . please," Devereaux cut in, "now is not the time."

Mark took a breath to recapture his self-control. "I apologize . . . to you, doctor, but not to Germaine. I am trying to see if she is capable of feeling guilt."

The French girl sank into a chair in a far corner of the room. She looked like a small trapped animal aware that there was no escape. When Piper returned to say that the room was ready, and Mark and the doctor carried the man upstairs between them, Germaine did not look up. Nor did she glance at her mother as Patience helped her from the room. She sat staring into space, her face expressionless. Samantha could not bring herself to look at her brother, who was standing silently by the window. None of the three spoke until Mark returned.

"You can be spared what is coming," he told Richard kindly, "if you wish to leave."

"Thanks, but I prefer to remain."

"Samantha?"

"Do you want me to stay?"

"I do. I am anxious that you should know why I wanted your uncle's notes—all this is just part of it. Later, you will learn the whole."

He turned to Germaine who was sitting with her face stubbornly averted, and now he let out every ounce of contempt and anger that he felt for her. "Your tragic parents will be cared for at Hawksmere so long as is necessary, but there will never be any place here for you. If your mother wishes you to be near until your father dies, then accommodation will be provided for you, but as far as possible from the other occupants of this house. If your mother does not wish you to remain, then you will go—and I don't give a damn where to. With your talent for self-preservation you are sure to survive until your activities betray you. The law exacts a harsh penalty for traitors—and for spies.

"I found you out a long time ago, Germaine. I was only

waiting for you to hang yourself with your own greed. Of course, the incident with the parasol proved my suspicions. Remember when you accidentally tossed it down the harbor steps to Jake Dempster? When I retrieved it, I glanced at it to see if it were damaged, and what did I find? A note tucked within the frame. No wonder you replaced it in the back of the carriage as quickly as possible. It must have been disconcerting, later, to find your note gone. I had pocketed it. Let me tell you, it was more than disconcerting to me when I read it after your departure."

She rounded on him then, her face distorted with fury. "You thief!" she screamed. "You are a thief and a spy!"

He laughed at her as Samantha looked on, astonished.

"You are the spy, Germaine, but a clumsy and amateurish one. That note referred to plans for turning the great dike across the marsh into a canal all the way to Hythe, to hinder future attempts at invasion. Simeon Kimbolt had conveniently let that information drop when we dined at his house—for your ear especially, I surmise. I have suspected for a long time that our Reverend gentleman went along with the smugglers, and that he did a great deal more besides."

Richard started in surprise, and Mark nodded. "Yes, Dick, I became suspicious of Simeon when I learned the identity of the purchaser of Monks Hall, though the sale of the property was discretely negotiated from London. But the agent acting on behalf of the vendor was less discrete. The price obtained was so high that he bragged about it in a tavern close by my boatyard. A few drinks, and the agent talked."

"Hell's teeth!" exclaimed Richard, slapping his thigh in astonishment. "Uncle Simeon? One of the leaders? I always felt there was something deuced havey-cavey about the man, but never suspected that!"

"A very powerful leader," Mark confirmed. "The fact that the vicar of Rye apparently had an unlimited supply of gold to invest in the acquisition of Monks Hall told its own story. Smugglers are frequently not averse to selling useful information, but the wise ones never put pen to paper. They leave that to others." Mark spun around to Germaine, his anger deepening as he looked into her face. "And that was where *you* came in. He must have been notified that you were coming to Hawksmere—I was the pawn to get you here—and hence your contact with Dempster, one of his henchmen. To whom was Dempster going to pass your note that day? To the

skipper of the vessel that had just unloaded, to hand over to someone else when they reached the other side? You yourself could not approach a fisherman without attracting attention."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," she smirked.

His hand flashed out. He was beside himself with fury but he stopped his anger before he could act. Slapping her was pointless; it would not serve as fit punishment for a traitor.

"Let me remind you," he went on in a low voice, "that you gave yourself away. Your parasol was dropped a shade too opportunely. I had seen Dempster approaching, his eyes on you—not in admiration, but in expectancy. I was puzzled. This man had recently started to look very affluent. That meant something. Added to his glance, it showed that there was some connection between you. You and Dempster, the very one you had begged me to send packing to keep you away from his filthy hands!"

Mark turned to Samantha. "I have not forgotten my vow, Samantha," he added in a soft, meaningful tone. "I will see him hanged or imprisoned yet."

Germaine whimpered, "Why did you say nothing? Why not question me . . . let me explain?"

"Because I chose to watch and wait instead, and to ponder on your excuses for delaying our wedding. It seemed significant that only after you met Victoria Turner did you talk about preparing for it, ordering an unnecessary trousseau that would take some time to complete—all part of the charade to cover your visits to her, which I suspect had little to do with clothes. I had her background investigated and learned that she had been a protégée of the notorious Madame Bertin. Then I began watching your little evasions, the excuses, the encouragement of other men, and finally your infidelity. Were these compatible with the behavior of a woman in love?"

"And what has all this to do with some document Jonathan Kimbolt left behind?" Germaine asked scornfully.

"So you have heard about that. . . . From Mrs. Turner? Or from Simeon Kimbolt? With every word you utter, you implicate yourself further. As for my stepfather's document, I merely hope it may throw some light on his brother's ugly, dirty activities. At one time, Jonathan himself had been involved with the smugglers. I knew that because he told me. It was a shock to me then because it came at a time of deeper shock, but I am older and wiser now. I hoped my late

stepfather might have had suspicions, or even proof of the traitor in clergyman's disguise, and recorded them. So if you would fetch the papers now, Samantha, I would be grateful."

Germaine's lips curled in a smug smile. "She will not find them."

"Meaning *you* have?"

She made no answer; merely sat there, grinning, her confidence creeping back.

Unexpectedly, Dick cut in. "She may well have them. My sister's room has been ransacked. I came hurrying to tell you when you arrived. The mattress has been slashed, pillows, cushions, upholstery, even curtain linings, everything! You never saw such a mess! I went along to tell Samantha that I was leaving Hawksmere because Mark had given me my marching orders, and stumbled upon the wreckage." He got up and went to her side. "But I knew nothing about Uncle Jonothan and a document and your having it. What is it all about?"

"Uncle Jonothan left a confession about his responsibility for his wife's death," Samantha explained quietly. "He had loosened that wall originally where she fell. But someone called up to her, making her lean over—" She turned to Mark with pain in her eyes. "Someone called her by a name that only you used. . . ."

"And you believe *I* did it?" Mark burst out, "Good God, Samantha, do you really believe that?"

"I don't want to."

"But you thought that was why I wanted Jonothan's papers." He went to her and looked down into her face.

She nodded. "You used to call her Ruthie, never 'Mother.' Uncle Jonothan thought you called to her by chance as you rode on the marsh below, but his self-blame and self-hatred was so great that he held himself solely responsible for her death. I was not so sure though," she said, examining his face for any indication of guilt or innocence. "What puzzled *me* was your determination to get hold of his confession, and the only reason I could think of was that you feared it would incriminate you."

Germaine began to laugh. The sound began as a gentle titter and rose to a peal of shrill amusement.

"And that was all it was? An old man's confession? Everyone thought it named names and pointed guilt in all directions!" Her laughter continued until Mark went over and seized her shoulders, shaking her into silence.

"You can't prove a thing against me!" she spat at him, wriggling from his grasp. "Nor can any of you! And the old man's notes are not anywhere to be found."

"So *you* were ordered to find them, not Alice!" Samantha exclaimed. "Victoria Turner told me someone was searching . . . that proves your association with them. How else would you know that the notes aren't to be found?"

"But they are," said a voice from the door. "I have them here."

Alice stood there—a quiet, disdainful Alice, who glared at her young mistress with unconcealed dislike.

"I saw you hurrying from the west wing, in one of your tempers, m'amselle. I was on my way to help you dress for dinner. Then, seeing the mood you were in, I thought better of it. But the only reason for your being in the west wing, I thought, must have been to look for Miss Samantha. I like Miss Samantha and I don't like you, m'amselle, and I don't care if the master tells me to pack my bag and clear out, the way *you* told me to—"

"I'll do nothing of the sort," Mark assured her. "What did you find, Alice, when you reached Miss Samantha's room?" he asked eagerly.

"A right rare shambles, that's what. I guessed that my mother must have persuaded m'amselle to ransack the place when I refused. I wasn't going to ferret amongst Miss Samantha's things, and so I'd told her."

Germaine said, acidly, "So you seized the opportunity to lurk in the upstairs corridors waiting for—"

Alice knew exactly what she was implying. "It doesn't matter who I was waiting for!" she blazed, turning on her. "And waiting for Master Richard wouldn't do me much good, would it? I went along to Miss Samantha's room and began to tidy up. I thought what a shock it would be for Miss Samantha to find her place like that. I began by picking up scattered clothes, and my fingers caught in the damaged bodice of one of her gowns."

She smiled scornfully at Germaine. "If you'd looked more carefully instead of just flinging things around, you would have been more successful in finding these." She brandished the pages in Germaine's face. "Believe me, you'll rue the day you became involved with my mother, just as my father did. And James Turner *was* my real father, whatever tale that bastard preacher put about."

She went over and held out the papers to Samantha. "Take

them, Miss. They belong to you. I think you ought to know that I've read them, and I'm not sorry because there is something there that needs explaining."

"And what is that, Alice?" Samantha asked, gently.

"My father's death. No one knows the truth about it, but me. He used to come to see me at Sandgate. He would time his visits when my mother was not there. She was working for a dressmaker in Folkestone then. He came the day after Mrs. Kimbolt died, and he was in a terrible state. Worried. I could see that. Then my mother walked in and took one look at him and asked what was wrong. She was alarmed in case he had lost his job and the money he gave her would stop. All that mattered to her was that he should pay our rent, as always.

"Then he told her about the mistress being killed, and how. 'Bad luck,' said my mother, 'but accidents will happen.' 'This wasn't an accident,' he told her. I can hear him saying it now.

"He was taking one of his walks on the marsh and heard a voice calling to Mrs. Kimbolt. He looked up, and there was the man, half-hidden by some bushes, calling her by the name her son always used. My father couldn't think why the Reverend Kimbolt should behave so strangely. He said he felt he ought to go to the master and tell him, but my mother warned him to keep out of it. If he went poking his nose into other people's affairs, especially his employer's, she said, he'd be out of a job in no time.

"Out of a job, indeed. A day or two later, taking his walk on the marsh again, my father was drowned. It couldn't have been an accident. He knew the marsh so well he could have walked it blindfolded."

"You mean Uncle Simeon arranged his death?" Dick said in horror. "So he must have known your father had seen him—"

"Not until my mother told him. She went to the vicarage, taking me with her. Of course, she told me to wait outside, but the Reverend's daughter invited me in and we made toast by the fire while I waited. Her Aunt Charlotte seemed suspicious of my mother's visit, but the Reverend had locked the door on her, so she couldn't make a fuss. It wasn't until years later that I guessed my mother had blackmailed Simeon Kimbolt that day. And after he had got rid of my father—and I know how that was arranged, too—she packed our bags and went to see him again, and that was when he gave her a letter to Mr. Jonothan, and she got her shop in Hythe and I was given a home at Hawksmere. I hated her for getting rid of me

like that, although the late master was kind to me. That was why I refused to search for his papers. Whatever he had written was private, I thought, and should be left that way."

And so it would be, Samantha vowed, glancing down at the sheets in her hand. After Mark read them, she would burn Uncle Jonothan's story, page by page, in the library fireplace. The only thing she could not fathom now was how she could face Mark after misjudging him so. His display of devotion to Germaine had been a screen to hide other motives. The thing that made her happiest was the knowledge that it had been Dick, not Mark, who had been in Germaine's bed that night. Mark had, in fact, been true, and Samantha's heart leaped as she gazed at him.

"Alice, tell us—if it is not too painful—precisely how did your father meet his death?" Mark asked the maid softly.

"He went to meet *me*, sir. Or so he thought. My mother arranged it. But really, I think she was put up to it by the Reverend gentleman. All she did was send my father a message saying that she and I would be driving over to Appledore to carry out some fittings at a customer's house, so we could have an extra meeting, he and I. She suggested that spot on the edge of the marsh, near the bridge across the dike. But, of course," Alice shook her head sadly, "she wasn't going to Appledore at all, and I didn't know anything about it until I was living at Hawksmere. One day Mr. Jonothan sent for me and gave me a box Martha Piper had found in my father's room. He told me he thought it should be given to my mother, but I thought differently. Anything belonging to my father, I wanted. Inside there wasn't anything of value, mainly letters—he seemed to have kept every one he'd ever received. He had even kept those my mother had written to him when she loved him. As much as she was capable of loving anyone," Alice added in a sardonic tone.

"And there were things of mine—a baby's shoe, a wooden toy, and a miniature painted of me when I was three, just before he and my mother separated and he became butler at Hawksmere. And there was this last note from her suggesting the meeting. I have it, still, but my mother doesn't know," Alice's face hardened. "I can produce it any time I like."

Dick went to her side and took her hand. Samantha saw a new kindness in her brother's face as he said gently, "I'm sorry, Alice. Sorry about everything. You have been loyal to Uncle Jonothan. I shan't forget that."

"But you'll forget me when you're in America. You've

forgotten me already, really." She bit her lip and looked down at a spot on the rug. "I wish there was some place in the world *I* could go to, far away from here."

"Come with me, Alice," he said eagerly, grabbing her by the shoulders and spinning her around to face him. "I've saved enough from my ill-gotten gains to pay your passage money and I'll work hard for both of us in the New World."

She shook her head sadly.

"You're offering to do the right thing by me, but that isn't what I want."

She lifted her proud head and walked out of the room, not looking back. There was a touching dignity about her that Samantha hoped she would never lose. There might be a lot of her mother in her, but there was a great deal of her father, too.

A brief silence followed, shattered almost at once by a banging on the front door. Then Aunt Charlotte's voice echoed between the high walls. "Is anyone at home?" she called. "Why doesn't anyone come to greet me?" Germaine half rose from her chair, plainly anxious to slip away unnoticed, but Mark placed himself directly in front of her.

"Not yet, please," he said curtly. "I have a few questions that yet need to be put to you." She sank back near the door with an air of defeat, and scowled.

"I am looking for Patience," Aunt Charlotte announced as she entered the room. "The young woman returned for neither tea nor supper, and what with all this excitement about spy arrests, naturally I am worried. Off she went for one of those drives of hers—not inviting me, of course. Just to Folkestone and back, she said, but that was long before luncheon and now look at the time—after ten o'clock! It is unsafe for a young woman to be driving across the marsh alone at this hour. I came here first, hoping she may have called on her way home—" She peered about the room.

"Spy arrests?" Mark interrupted. "In this area?" He came to her side and led her to a chair, since she seemed very distracted.

"Indeed, yes. There are dragoons everywhere. And I saw that girl Alice in Rye earlier today, coming out of the Commissioners of Custom's office, as bold as brass. She appeared not in the least worried when I saw her. She even dared to smile at me. Such insolence! And then she had the audacity to say she wished my brother Simeon good luck, and he was certainly going to need it! And so are other people,

she added—the hussy. But my dears,” she fluttered getting up and going to Samantha, “Rye is humming with the news. This is what I was talking about, you see. Some people over at Hythe have been arrested. One of them, a former shepherd, I hear, turned King’s Evidence and now accomplices are being rounded up. I understand they are heading this way, and I don’t want Patience caught up in this sort of thing! Oh, dear. Oh dear, what am I to do? I am quite bewildered by it all.” She practically fell into a chair and began to fan herself with her handkerchief, which she produced from her gray reticule.

“And the news from London, too! It came in on the mail coach. Some French woman named Madame Bertin, with her own couture establishment catering to high society, is believed to have a chain of women working hand in glove with her. Spies, do you hear? They will soon be brought to trial and suffer their well-deserved fate.”

At this last, there was a scuttling near the door, and before anyone could make a move toward her, Germaine had slammed it after her.

“Good gracious me, what is the matter with your fiancée, Mr. Chaters?” Charlotte asked in a huffy voice. “I must say I consider it very ill-mannered to rush out of the room like that the moment a guest arrives. She will catch her death of cold in that thin dress, the silly girl. . . .”

Richard raced to the front door in time to see Germaine fleeing from the abbey, sobbing like a terrified animal. She turned in her tracks on reaching the lane, darting this way and that about the courtyard in a frantic bid to escape the squadron of dragoons who were at that very moment marching purposefully toward Hawksmere’s door. Richard started running toward her for all he was worth, and when he caught her, he held her tight, moved by pity despite the disgust he had felt both for her and for himself.

“There is no escape,” he said sadly as she tried to pull away. “We both have to face up to our mistakes and their consequences,” and he thought of Alice, whose love he had destroyed. He knew more now—more about women and about life, and he regretted his foolish, impetuous ways. The one he had jilted was the one he should have cherished and kept by him always.

Germaine struggled and kicked, screaming abuse at him. “What do you know about it, you stupid English dolt? Let me go, *let me go!*”

And then, as Mark came striding toward them, she turned

and pleaded pitiously. "Save me, Mark! As you loved me, for God's sake. Save me!"

But then the sound of marching feet turned into the courtyard. She flung herself to the ground, writhing and sobbing, her cries splitting the air like those of a night creature falling prey to a predatory beast.

Chapter 24



For a long time it was whispered throughout the marsh that someone had betrayed that poor little émigrée whose father died the very night she was arrested. It was said that her grieving mother had sought refuge with the good Sisters at a convent not far from Rye. Speculation was rampant, but no one guessed the identity of the informer, responsible not only for the French girl's arrest, but also for that of the Reverend Simeon Kimbolt, of all people. This pillar of the church could not possibly be involved in anything so terrible as the charges laid against him—spying and smuggling!

But no one could deny that he had had a fair trial, and was found guilty, as was that hard-working dressmaker from Hythe.

As for that daughter of hers, the girl did not even wait for her mother's trial, but quit the country. To everyone's astonishment, young Richard Kimbolt took Alice with him to the New World as his bride. Set her cap at him, she had, so no wonder. Everyone knew what an audacious hussy she had always been, thinking herself too good for domestic service, but obviously making the most of the opportunities it gave her. . . .

Only Samantha and Mark knew the truth. Alice had packed her bag on the very night of the arrests and slipped quietly away from Hawksmere to take her chance with fate. But Richard could not bear to be without her, and rode into the night in search of her. He found her at dawn, asleep in a barn near Wittersham, London-bound. But, of course, neither Samantha nor Mark knew how he had gathered her into his arms, burying his face in her shoulder, and begged her not to leave him.

"I was a fool, sweet Alice, a besotted fool, and I deserve whatever punishment you mete out to me."

But it was not punishment Alice gave him in the silent barn, lying on a bed of sweet-smelling, newly harvested corn. Body to body, they renewed the delights of love, knowing that on both their parts now, this union was a symbol of their devotion, the foundation for a lasting relationship.

If only it could have been as simple between Samantha and Mark. Now that she saw how terribly she had misjudged him, she was too self-conscious to apologize, though she longed to do so. Her stiff-necked pride, which she could not overcome, kept her from approaching him. He was so silent these days, and had been so since Dick and Alice left; he seemed to be waiting, watching, almost challenging her.

Surely convention demanded that a bachelor should not retain a young spinster as his housekeeper when there was no one else in residence but the domestic staff. But Mark seemed content with the arrangement—at least he never mentioned it. Sometimes she caught him looking at her with that infuriating, quizzical, mocking curve of the mouth, and a look in his eye that seemed to say, "Well, my girl, when are you coming to heel?" And she would turn away quickly, her color heightened, her head tilted up proudly. As much as she tried to quell the feelings, her betraying heart beat as wildly as it had done when he made love to her.

What is the matter with me? she demanded of herself time after time. Why can I not pocket my pride, go to him, be loved by him again? She knew the answer. She did not want to be taken by him merely as a mistress. She wanted to be his wife, and so he would have to come to her.

At night she would lie awake, remembering the ecstasy of being loved by him, and she would turn her face into her pillow and weep with longing, knowing that she had only to go to his room to be welcomed into his bed, but knowing equally well that she would not take the first step. Only he

could do that. This torment continued; she could not make peace with her emotions. Sometimes she wondered if he were deliberately punishing her with this dalliance—her arrogant, tantalizing, extraordinary lover to whom her body had once belonged and yearned to belong again.

And then there was the question of Patience, for whom Samantha was deeply concerned. Finding out the truth about her father seemed to be more than this sheltered girl could bear. She refused to see anyone for a long time, even André Devereaux, that most compassionate of men. To her, the greatest humiliation of all was inheriting Monks Hall and everything in it. The fact that Simeon Kimbolt had led a double life made no difference in terms of right of ownership. He had, after all, inherited his share of the Kimbolt fortune and if he had invested it in property and objet d'art, the state could make no claim on his personal effects. The result was that an unhappy Patience found herself the owner of land and possessions for which she had no desire.

She immediately did what her father had pretended to do with his Kimbolt inheritance; she sold everything and gave the proceeds to charity. She saved only the portrait of Fair Clarissa, which she gave to Samantha. When a successor was appointed as parish priest in her father's place, Patience was forced to leave the vicarage. And since Monks Hall had been sold, she had nowhere to go.

"Patience must join you at Hawksmere," Mark declared. "She must stay as long as she wishes."

And although she eventually agreed to come, conveniently taking Samantha's mind off her own unfulfilled longings, Patience settled in more like a recluse than a woman starting a new life for herself. She shunned everyone except Samantha and refused to see André Devereaux when he called.

The doctor, however, was not a man to give up easily. "Tell her I will not budge from this place until she consents," he said, and installed himself in a high-backed wing chair in the drawing room, legs thrust out, arms folded across his chest, determination in every line of him.

Samantha found her cousin sitting beside her bedroom window, staring out across the marsh—a paler, quieter, thinner Patience who seemed to have put all her bubbling personality on a shelf. She refused to go downstairs.

"What is it, dear?" Samantha asked gently, kneeling by her cousin's chair and taking her hands.

"Don't you see, Samantha?" There was shame in her

fearful eyes. "Don't you understand? *What is in the blood . . .*"

"Come now," Samantha replied spiritedly. She tilted up Patience's chin with the tips of her fingers. "Oh, I'll agree, we Kimbolts aren't all fine, and the strain isn't the purest in the world," she joked, "but look at the good apples, not the rotten ones. My father, for example, and kind Uncle Jonathan. Even Dick saw the light and reformed in the end. And then there's you, Patience." She continued, "And I'm not all bad, I would have you remember!"

Patience smiled for the first time then. "Yours is the loveliest nature of them all, my dear," she said.

"Oh no," Samantha laughed. "Aunt Charlotte's verdict on my character was quite damning! She thought it 'deplorable, lacking in good manners and a sense of decorum, far too prone to chatter, and the result of a regrettable upbringing.'"

Patience joined in the laughter, and Samantha knew she had succeeded in changing her cousin's mood.

"So," she said, getting to her feet and pulling Patience up as well, "you surely cannot be so unkind as to let André go away disappointed. You know our motley Kimbolt ancestors left us with one redeeming characteristic at least," she added. "And that is courage. They were not afraid to live, or to go after the things they wanted, so you must not be afraid either, dear Cousin."

At that, Patience yielded. "I'll go see him," she said quietly. When they reached the hall, Samantha opened the drawing room door and gave her a gentle push inside. There was silence for a moment, then she heard André say with a catch in his voice, "Patience, my very dear Patience, you will never know how greatly I have missed you."

Samantha closed the door and hurried from the abbey seeking escape from their happiness. It reminded her too painfully of how much she longed for the very closeness these two had found together. It was all very well for her to preach to Patience about having the courage to go after the things one wanted. But never in her life had she been so indecisive as she was now. One moment she felt that she could no longer wait for Mark to make the first move but must hurry to him without delay, and then the next, she became terrified of reproach and rejection, should she do as her heart prompted her. Mark had his own fair share of pride. He would not easily forgive someone who had thought him capable of murder, infidelity and deceit!

Pacing the grounds, her thoughts swirling like the leaves about her feet, the predominant question concerned her immediate future. Where could she go and what could she do when Patience left Hawksmere? Undoubtedly, Devereaux would carry her cousin off as quickly as possible. Samantha would be totally alone then, for even Aunt Charlotte had speedily departed when the scandal concerning her brother broke out.

Although she had invited Samantha to take up residence again in that stifling household on Wimpole Street, the offer could never be considered. She had changed her life for good and all. She was her own woman now, and she would have to succeed without reliance on the charity of others.

One thing she did know: her home was now in Kent. Even the rumored threat of Napoleon coming across the Channel could not uproot her. For she had come home when she had come to Hawksmere. Kentish blood ran in her veins and, even more strongly ran her love for one particular Kentishman. As much as she argued with herself back and forth, she knew that she was prepared to stay here with him in whatever capacity he wanted her, mistress or wife, for without him she would merely be existing, never living.

Automatically, she turned her steps toward the summer house, which had become her secret retreat whenever she felt the need for solitude . . . or when the cherished memories it held lured her back. Now an overpowering compulsion to hide there struck her keenly. She had to lie down on the chaise longue where he had first loved her, and bury her face in the cushion on which his cherished head had lain. She lifted the latch almost reverently, closing the door softly behind her, and immediately responded to the atmosphere of the place. She had kept it dusted and swept, fragrant with flowers, aired with sea breezes through the lead-lighted windows, warmed by the sun on fine days and protected from the rain on wet ones. Scarcely a day had passed that she had not visited this shrine to her love.

Her hand trailed along the back of the chaise in passing, but she resisted the temptation to lie down on it, for that would revive longings and hinder clear thinking. She might even yield to her strong impulse to go in search of Mark. She knew that this very moment he would be riding home from Folkestone, his day's work done, and that he would go straight to the library after changing, and help himself to wine from the decanter. She had only to see him there and hold out

her arms to him for desire to rise in her again. "*Take me,*" she would murmur. "*Take me, Mark, and do with me what you will, I can fight no longer.*"

But she remained where she was, standing by the window facing the wide lawn above the marsh. The late afternoon was lit with clear marsh light that threw everything into sharp focus. Now it lit the far horizon, crimson tipped by the slowly descending sun. This was a spellbound world, a beautiful world, *her* world. She could never leave it, no matter what fate had in store.

There was a sound from behind. The door latch lifted quietly, a sound that sent her heart racing, and then the key turned in the lock. Had she imagined it, or were those really footfalls approaching her across the room? Her heart pounded in her ears, throbbed in her breast, set her blood racing. Then came the deep voice, crooning in her ear, "Sweet witch, why do you hide from me?"

His fingers touched her chin, turned her face toward him, and the soft marsh light revealed his strong and arrogant features, his hawk nose, his cleft chin, his sensuous mouth that could curse in anger or amusement, passion or tenderness. Now it quizzed her, as his gray-green eyes did, but his smile was seductive, and melted her apprehensions clean away.

She stammered helplessly. "I—I—I came for a brief rest—"

"You are a very poor liar, Samantha. I know how often you come here, for I do so myself, and I dare to hope that you care for the place because of the memories it holds. So don't say now that you have merely come to take a rest from household duties, because I believe it to be otherwise."

That dear, familiar, teasing note was in his voice, and also in his eyes and his smile, stirring her responsive blood so that she had to turn away to hide the betraying blush on her cheeks. She was silent, and then he said, "You know I am an impatient man by nature, so you must know how hard this waiting is for me. How much longer are you going to evade me?"

For me too, she wanted to say. "I have been unable to face you," she whispered. "I am so ashamed."

"Of letting me love you?" He put a hand on her cheek and let his fingers play over the soft delicate skin.

"No." She shook her head. "My shame is in misjudging you. I fear your anger because of it."

His mouth curved in a smile and he placed his hands on his hips in mock outrage. "And so you should, witch. What dastardly suspicions you held of me! That I was a rake and a philanderer were the least of my sins, you also believed me to be a criminal smuggler and possibly a murderer—"

"No! No! I feared those things, but never wanted to believe them—though you must admit the picture looked black against you." She was calmer now, reassured by the quality of his smile, which was teasing, but understanding as well. "And you have never explained why you were near the cloisters that night, although now I suspect I know. You were not standing watch *for* them. You were watching them at work, trying to identify them."

"And succeeding to a point. I recognized Dick, and the blackguard, Dempster—by the way, did you know that I actually did break his handsome jaw that day at Monks Hall? I am sorry I let him off so lightly."

"But enough of other people." He reached out and touched her golden hair, lying in disarray about her face and shoulders. "I am only interested in us—you and me, my dear, sweet, proud Samantha." His hand slid down to her neck, and stayed there, gently stroking, while the other lifted her chin and his lips sought her mouth. She quivered beneath his touch and he wooed her with soft kisses until she threw her arms about his neck.

At last he gathered her up and carried her to the couch. She felt the strong lines of his body and her love overflowed, filling her heart and mind and body so that when he laid her back on the cushions, she could scarcely wait for him to disrobe her. His own impatience made his fingers tremble. His voice shook as he murmured, "My beloved, my dear desirable one." His mouth was on her breasts even as his hands stripped away her garments, and then she lay naked and pliant in his arms, as wild as he with desire. Her hands tugged at his shirt, pulling it away until she could stroke his flesh and smother it with eager, demanding kisses.

They came together quickly, there, in the shrine of their love, consummating their union yet again, soaring on ever-increasing waves of passion to the utmost pinnacle. And when at last they were still, they lay quietly and at peace until he let out a happy laugh.

"What is it?" she asked, dreamily, looking into his face with such love and caring that she thought she might swoon with it.

"Shall we tell the others?" he asked with a chuckle, his hands still caressing her soft flanks. "Shall we admit that we have been anticipating our wedding night because neither of us can bear to wait a moment longer? And I swear to you, my lovely, that I cannot and will not. There will be no nonsense about a trousseau, either. . . ."

Breathless with joy, she clung to him. "Why should I want one? Nor do I need one, with all those lovely clothes you bought me."

"Which I shall strip from you at every possible moment, dear love. And when you are wearing them I shall think, 'Everything beneath belongs to me—forever and ever,' for no man shall have you, but I. So the sooner a ring is on your finger to let the whole world know, the happier I shall be."

Could there be any greater joy than this? she thought ecstatically. He stroked her body again, exploring every curve and line of her until he reached the secret place he so delighted in, and started yet again the delicious love play that fired her flesh. She cried out over and over for him to come to her, satiated with pleasure and still craving more of him. They rested, but soon they were united again, flesh with flesh, heart with heart.

When at last their passion exploded in glorious fulfillment and they were at peace, he whispered, "I have wanted, for so long, to call you to my side. Marriage cannot bring us closer than we already are." Then he kissed her again. "It cannot, but it will."

"You don't mind then," she teased, "being married to a Kimbolt, despite what one of them did to your family?"

"Mind? How could I have it otherwise? Hawksmere is the Kimbolt ancestral home. At night those angry ghosts would dance about my head for having taken possession here, a usurper as your Aunt Charlotte says. But you shall be my insurance—my good luck charm."

She laughed and drew his head down to her full breasts. "May I ask you something?" she whispered in his ear.

"Anything, my love, if it be in my power to give it you." He wrapped his arms around her.

"Well, then," she said with a twinkle in her eye, "could we anticipate our wedding night once more, if there is time before dinner?"

He threw back his head and laughed. "With pleasure," he said, and then he obliged.



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